

A Study of Cao Baoping's Film: Chinese Auteur Paradigm

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Abstract

This dissertation positions Chinese director Cao Baoping as an auteur who has developed a distinctive Chinese auteur paradigm through his synthesis of formal innovation and culturally grounded narrative practice. By conducting close textual analyses of his films—from “The Troublemakers” (2006) to “Cock and Bull” (2016)—the study demonstrates how Cao constructs a productive dialogue between globally circulating narrative strategies and the specific socio-cultural conditions of contemporary China.

At the core of this research is the articulation of Cao’s unique “auteur-alchemist” approach, through which he transforms established genre conventions into incisive cultural critique. Films such as “The Equation of Love and Death” (2008) exemplify his inventive deployment of fragmented narrative structures and psychologically charged soundscapes to probe the anxieties of postsocialist urban life. Meanwhile, works like “Cock and Bull” (2016) mobilize nonlinear storytelling to generate narrative tension that intersects with, and at times destabilizes, Confucian ethical logics. This dynamic interplay between cinematic form and indigenous value systems yields that are both emotionally resonant and commercially meaningful within the Chinese film landscape.

Drawing on methodologies from film studies, cultural theory, and ethical philosophy, this dissertation argues that Cao’s cinema operates as a critical lens through which to observe China’s ongoing social transformations. Ultimately, the study situates Cao Baoping as a significant auteur within Chinese cinema, offering new insights into how culturally specific storytelling practices can articulate broader human concerns while remaining rooted in the complexities of contemporary China.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Since the advent of the 21st century, Chinese cinema has undergone a profound structural transformation, shaped by the interwoven forces of marketization, globalization, and policy intervention (Chen 2023). Mainstream commercial cinema, propelled by capital investment and genre-based production strategies, has expanded rapidly, establishing a robust industrial system marked by a distinctive "cinematic industrial aesthetics" (Chen 2019). Concurrently, independent and art-house films persist with resilient commitment to individual expression and socio-political engagement. Particularly notable is the emergence of filmmakers within the "New Mainstream" (新主流) framework, who occupy a liminal position—exerting substantial box-office influence while maintaining artistic autonomy. Actively negotiating between institutional structures, market imperatives, and creative expression, they challenge the binary of "independent" versus "commercial" (Chen 2023). This shift necessitates a critical re-examination of "authorship" (auteurism) in the contemporary Chinese context, prompting renewed inquiry into its transformation as an aesthetic and theoretical paradigm.

The figure of the "auteur director" originated within the French New Wave, serving to reaffirm the director's central creative role (Andrew 2004, 15). This notion evolved within Euro-American film discourse and was subsequently adapted within Chinese film studies. From the culturally assertive stances of the Fifth Generation directors, through the politically charged works of early 21st-century independent filmmakers, to the recent proliferation of genre-oriented auteurs, the label "Chinese auteur director" has transcended monolithic definitions. It now signifies a multifaceted creative agency intricately embedded within specific historical circumstances, industrial formations, and cultural ideologies (Chen 2023). Nonetheless, scholarly discussions of "Chinese authorship" remain fragmented and underdeveloped (Li 2022), often lacking systematic textual analysis and theoretical models attuned to China's sociocultural and industrial specificities. There is an urgent need to reconceptualize authorship in light of new production logics and cultural conditions.

Within this framework, director Cao Baoping presents a compelling and distinctive instance of the "genre auteur". His films consistently integrate the narrative conventions of genre cinema with a pronounced engagement with social realities and a highly individualized audio-visual style (Liu 2019, 23), achieving a nuanced synthesis of commercial viability and artistic ambition (Chen 2023). More importantly, his recurrent exploration of themes such as violence, moral ambiguity, and identity crisis forms a discernible "authorial signature" permeating his body of work (Liu 2019, 41). Although existing scholarship has examined his narrative structures and visual style (Liu 2019, 25), such studies tend to be film-specific, lacking a comprehensive, diachronic analysis of his oeuvre. Fewer have situated Cao's practice within the broader theoretical discourse on Chinese cinematic authorship. Addressing this lacuna, the present study synthesizes multiple theoretical perspectives to conduct a systematic analysis of Cao's film language and aesthetic strategies, thereby illuminating his significance and paradigmatic potential as a contemporary Chinese auteur.

1.1 Research Background and Problem Statement

Following the turn of the century, state-led reforms and market-oriented transformations have profoundly reshaped China's film industry. The interplay of industrial policies, capital-driven mechanisms, and global dynamics has collectively reshaped the production, distribution, and reception patterns of Chinese cinema. As one scholar observes, "Chinese cinema has shifted from being a cultural tool to a market-driven system, becoming both an instrument of national soft power and a sector of commercial economy" (Zhang 2012, 3).

Transformations in the governance of the film sector have created both opportunities and constraints for directorial practice. Market reforms have enhanced directors' autonomy in financing and production; nevertheless, the censorship apparatus remains highly restrictive. This phenomenon can be described as "creative regulation under institutional tension"¹ (Berry 2004, 44). Filmmakers are compelled to negotiate delicate boundaries, developing strategic modes of expression that assert personal style while avoiding institutional "red lines".

Concurrently, structural market changes have exerted significant influence on directorial creativity. Following the reform of the theater chain system in 2003, Chinese cinema rapidly commercialized, marked by the proliferation of genre-based production models (Yeh & Davis 2008, 190-207) and a dual emphasis on commercial and aesthetic strategies. Under intense box-office pressures, directors increasingly gravitate toward balancing commercial viability with artistic distinctiveness, a trajectory characterized as "auteurist expression within generic structures"².

Furthermore, the globalization of cultural exchange has broadened the horizons of Chinese filmmakers, affording access to new audiences and international financing. As noted, "Chinese directors are moving from local to global cultural contexts, balancing domestic discourses with transnational readability" (Teo 2019, 27). Yet, this dual orientation inevitably engenders tensions, compromises, and hybridizations in the creative process.

Under the combined pressures of institutional regulation, market imperatives, and global circulation, the creative ecology of contemporary Chinese cinema is characterized by interlocking tensions: between state control and artistic freedom, between market demand and auteurist expression, and between local specificity and global visibility. Auteur directors navigate this dynamic matrix, striving to establish a precarious equilibrium. It is precisely through these negotiations that "Chinese authorship" assumes its complex, pluralistic, and evolving forms.

¹ This concept, informed by Chris Berry's work, illustrates that Chinese filmmaking does not simply capitulate to censorship but operates in a dynamic negotiation with official regulations. Through strategies such as allegory and generic framing, filmmakers have cultivated a distinctive aesthetic of negotiation and expression within the institutional interstices.

² The term encourages directors to infuse commercial genre frameworks—such as crime or martial arts—with distinctive authorial signatures, whether in visual style, narrative preference, or thematic vision, thereby achieving a balance between market appeal and artistic individuality.

The notion of the "Auteur"³ itself, originating during the French New Wave and predicated on the director as the "ultimate author", encountered significant challenges when transposed into the Chinese context. In its early localization, the concept was most prominently embodied by Fifth Generation directors like Zhang Yimou 张艺谋 and Chen Kaige 陈凯歌, who rearticulated national narratives through an aesthetic lens while benefiting from state industry support (Lu 1997, 45). Their works established discernible personal styles, forming an initial model of "authorial imprint"⁴, though constrained by systemic factors.

By the 1990s, with the advent of digital technologies and the loosening of institutional controls, a new wave of independent filmmakers emerged. Figures such as Lou Ye 娄烨 and Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯 explored the political and socio-structural dimensions of contemporary China, with works like "Suzhou River" (苏州河) and "Platform" (站台) exemplifying an authorship defined less by a unified aesthetic grammar than by critical engagement with lived realities. However, Independent filmmakers struggle with marginal distribution; their authorship becomes a site of both individual expression and social marginality (Pickowicz & Zhang 2006, 58).

Entering the new millennium, the ecology of Chinese cinema witnessed the rise of "auteur directors" operating within the framework of genre filmmaking. These directors infused popular genres—ranging from crime and youth films to thrillers—with personalized aesthetic and thematic imprints, thereby negotiating a space of relative creative autonomy within the constraints of the commercial market. For instance, Lou Ye's "Suzhou River" combines noir stylistics with a distinctly feminine perspective, while Peter Chan mobilizes genre conventions to interrogate questions of class stratification. Such a path demonstrates the merging of auteurism with genre innovation (Chu 2017, 103).

Despite these trajectories, research on auteur theory in the Chinese context remains hindered by several persistent limitations. First, much of the theoretical framework continues to rely heavily on Latin American or Euro-American models of genre and cultural analysis, with insufficient resources for constructing paradigms grounded in indigenous conditions. Second, existing scholarship often privileges case studies of single films or single genres, while systematic cross-film and cross-genre comparative approaches remain scarce. Third, thematic dimensions central to auteurist practice in China—such as realism, violence, and ethical negotiation—are still under-theorized. Consequently, the articulation of "authorship" in Chinese cinema requires a fundamental reconceptualization, one that situates theoretical

³ The concept of the "Auteur" originated in the 1950s through the French journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*, where critics such as François Truffaut proposed the notion that the director is the principal "author" of a film. The theory asserts that a director's distinctive artistic vision, stylistic characteristics, and thematic concerns should define their oeuvre and serve as the central criterion for evaluating its creative value. See François Truffaut, "*Une certaine tendance du cinéma français*," *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no. 31 (January 1954): 15–29.

⁴ The term "authorial imprint" refers to the personal stylistic marks that a director inscribes within their work. In the Chinese context, it specifically denotes how early filmmakers, even within the constraints of state narratives and collective production frameworks, managed to cultivate identifiable individual artistic traits through distinctive aesthetic strategies.

inquiry within the specificities of national structures, cultural discourses, and institutional constraints.

Within this evolving context, Cao's directorial trajectory emerges as particularly representative. Since his early work "Troublemakers" (光荣的愤怒 2006), he has gradually developed a distinctive audiovisual language characterized by calm and restrained narrative pacing, often addressing themes of crime, psychological conflict, and ethical boundaries. Films such as "Dead End" (烈日灼心 2015), "Cock and Bull" (追凶者也 2016), and "Einstein and Einstein" (狗十三 2013) consistently demonstrate this stylistic orientation: exaggerated editing is rarely employed, natural lighting is favored, and the sound design emphasizes ambient noise to cultivate a sense of atmosphere.

Although his films are largely situated within commercial genres and frequently bear mainstream labels, Cao persistently extends the expressive possibilities of genre frameworks through multi-perspective narratives and the introduction of complex ethical conflicts. Centered on issues of violence, family ties, and public morality, his works expand the boundaries of conventional genre storytelling. For instance, "Cock and Bull" adopts the surface structure of a crime mystery, yet beneath this framework lies a sustained meditation on human contradictions, notions of justice, and the mechanisms of media representation.

A recurring feature of Cao's directorial practice is his placement of characters within moral dilemmas and ethically ambiguous situations, thereby encouraging audience introspection. In "Einstein and Einstein", tensions within parent-child relationships, the operation of social judgment, and intergenerational conflicts are rendered through a tense visual rhythm and a spatial sense of confinement, immersing viewers in the oppressive atmosphere of family ethics.

Cao's treatment of violence further underscores his auteurist sensibility. Violent imagery in his films is never employed as mere spectacle but is carefully integrated into the narrative as an instrument of emotional construction. By combining techniques such as slow motion, silence, and meticulously designed ambient sound, he evokes profound psychological tension in audiences. This mode of representing violence not only highlights underlying social contradictions but also tactically circumvents censorship restrictions through restraint, thereby "unlike Tarantino or Park Chan-wook's ornamental violence, Chinese filmmakers resemanticize violence under censorship and cultural constraints" (Zhu 2010, 67).

Within the commercial film system, Cao Baoping has managed to retain a measure of creative autonomy, facilitated both by the recognition his works achieve within mainstream distribution channels and the capital support they attract. This position allows him to engage social issues from within genre filmmaking while maintaining stylistic coherence in audiovisual expression. His career thus exemplifies the complex negotiation between auteurist agency and institutional frameworks, making him a significant case study in the evolving discourse on the "Chinese auteur director".

1.2 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

1.2.1 Literature Review

Within the genealogy of contemporary Chinese film directors, Cao Baoping has constructed a cinematic world that harmoniously combines market appeal with critical depth through his distinctive authorial vision and genre-based creative practices. Owing to this dual orientation, his works have garnered sustained scholarly attention. A relatively mature interpretive framework has taken shape, centering on several interrelated dimensions.

Narrative strategy and genre analysis form the core of academic inquiries. A substantial body of literature has examined how Cao reconfigures conventional crime and suspense genres through a personalized auteurist lens. Scholars observe that he employs multi-linear narrative structures and highly condensed dramatic conflicts (Zhang 2018, 15) to infuse his works with literary depth and narrative intensity. This creative transformation has enabled his films to achieve a dynamic balance between commercial viability and artistic ambition, leading to his recognition as a representative “genre auteur”.

Thematic depth and humanistic concern constitute another important avenue. Research shows his camera persistently focuses on social fractures and the existential struggles of ordinary individuals. His filmography consistently exposes latent power dynamics, moral paradoxes under extreme conditions, and structural injustices (Li 2018, 43). Following the release of “Einstein and Einstein”, scholarly attention increasingly converged on the motif of “anger” and the dissection of intergenerational trauma. As Shen Zhaohui (2018, 33) observes, the film’s portrayal of a girl’s coming-of-age incisively mirrors the mechanisms of discipline and emotional violence in Chinese familial structures, underscoring the critical realist undertones of his cinema.

Discussions surrounding directorial authorship and performance aesthetics constitute another fertile dimension. Scholars frequently highlight the influence of Cao’s academic background, noting the structural rigor of his scripts and his control over narrative pacing (Chen 2015, 44). Simultaneously, the phenomenon of Cao as a “maker of award-winning actors” has generated critical attention. His advocacy of a “de-dramatized” performance style—privileging naturalism and psychological authenticity—has become a crucial component of his authorial identity (Liang 2015, 49).

However, several structural limitations persist within current research paradigms. The first lies in the homogenization of research topics and the relative neglect of film ontology. Although studies on narrative and thematic content have laid a solid foundation, much extant scholarship reveals repetitive arguments and overlapping analytical frameworks. More critically, for a director whose artistry relies heavily on audiovisual tension, academic discourse has tended to overlook the systematic exploration of his cinematic ontology. Elements such as lighting, color, handheld cinematography, complex soundscapes, and montage rhythms have yet to receive comprehensive analysis (Liu 2019, 5). This inclination to prioritize “literary content over audiovisual form” has led to an incomplete understanding of Cao’s authorship.

The second limitation concerns the narrowness of theoretical perspectives and the lack of sustained interdisciplinary dialogue. Most existing studies remain anchored in film theory and socio-historical criticism. Few scholars have attempted to introduce more diverse frameworks—such as psychoanalysis, spatial theory, or comparative cultural poetics—to decode deeper cultural and philosophical layers (Jin 2019, 28). This theoretical conservatism limits the potential to address the director’s engagement with broader existential questions concerning modern anxiety, fractured identity, and moral uncertainty.

Building upon these achievements and deficiencies, the present study seeks to systematically reconstruct the aesthetic system of Cao’s cinema, with particular emphasis on the formal ontology of audiovisual language. Using key films as primary case studies, this research endeavors to reveal how Cao’s practice has given rise to a functional paradigm of Chinese auteur cinema—one that reconciles artistic integrity with industrial pragmatism and negotiates tensions between genre convention and social critique.

1.2.2 Theoretical Foundations

This study draws upon a multidimensional theoretical framework to interpret the concept of the Auteur in Cao’s films, comprising four interrelated dimensions.

First, the study is grounded in auteur theory. From François Truffaut to Andrew Sarris (Truffaut, 1954; Sarris, 1962), auteur theory positions the director as the primary creative force. Within this framework, “auteurism” is conceptualized as a cultural strategy shaped by institutional constraints and market dynamics. In Cao’s case, this is evident through how directors embed personal discourse within the genre structure of Chinese cinema (Li 2016, 22).

Second, the study engages with the aesthetic theory of violence. Steven Prince emphasizes that “cinematic violence is not merely sensory stimulation, it often functions as a moral commentary” (Prince 2003, 58). Within the context of Chinese cinema, violent imagery often expresses how “cinematic violence visually rearticulates the fractures of Chinese social reality” (Wang 2019, 101). This localized understanding provides a framework for interpreting Cao’s visual strategies.

Third, this research incorporates insights from the localization of film noir and realism. Zheng argues that the noir aesthetic in contemporary Chinese crime films constructs “a visual order of social coldness” (Zheng 2017, 133), serving as a foundation for understanding the “noir texture” permeating Cao’s works.

Finally, the study integrates psychoanalytic theory with ethical analysis as key interpretive lenses. Lin Niantong’s “Mirroring–Drifting Theory”⁵, combined with Lacan’s concept of the mirror stage, reveals complex structures of gaze and cognitive displacement. Concurrently, ethical discourse elucidates how moral hierarchies and tensions are dramatized within film

⁵ Lin Niantong, *Chinese Film Aesthetics* (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 1991), 78–112, where the “mirroring–drifting” theory is formulated.

narratives. Together, these frameworks offer a robust basis for understanding the phenomenon of ethical suspension in Cao's practice.

1.2.3 Research Gaps and the Positioning of This Study

A systematic review of existing scholarship reveals that although academic research on director Cao Baoping has established a preliminary understanding of his cinematic oeuvre, significant gaps and avenues for deeper exploration remain. These deficiencies provide a clear and compelling academic entry point for the present study.

Existing research tends to be fragmented, characterized by a tendency to “see the trees but not the forest”⁶. Most studies concentrate on individual films or specific techniques, failing to consider Cao's decade-spanning trajectory as an integrated whole. The consistent aesthetic pursuit across his body of work, the internal logic underlying his stylistic evolution, and his complete artistic persona have not been adequately theorized.

The theoretical frameworks employed are relatively singular, lacking cross-theoretical integration. Most scholars rely predominantly on established genre theory or realist criticism, which fail to capture intricate tensions within Cao's works. Within this limitation, two major theoretical blind spots are observed.

The absence of a sophisticated narrative ethics framework has led to a neglect of how moral meaning is cinematically constructed rather than merely depicted. Current scholarship lacks the conceptual vocabulary to analyze how moral dilemmas are actively fabricated and given tension through Cao's specific narrative systems.

Concurrently, the lack of psychoanalytic and cognitive frameworks addressing audience experience has further limited understanding. Analyses of Cao's audiovisual language and audience psychology often rely on established film theory from other contexts, overlooking the potential of the Mirroring–Drifting Theory. Current research has yet to develop this framework as a systematic analytical model.

Beyond these blind spots, existing scholarship has not addressed a more foundational question: To what extent does Cao's creative practice constitute a distinctly Chinese paradigm of authorship, differentiated from established auteurist models? Cao's artistic success lies in navigating intersections of artistic integrity, industrial mechanisms, and cultural specificity. However, current research often stops at descriptive admiration of this “balancing act,” without elevating it into a theoretical model.

⁶ The expression “seeing the trees but not the forest” refers to a common research limitation—an excessive focus on specific cases or local details (“trees”) at the expense of a holistic understanding of the internal connections and broader context (“forest”), which often results in a fragmented analytical perspective.

In light of these gaps, the present study positions itself as a systematic, theoretically integrated, and paradigm-oriented inquiry. It adopts a cross-film comparative framework to construct a comprehensive “aesthetic map” of his cinematic authorship. It pursues an interdisciplinary path, drawing upon auteur theory and film semiotics while introducing innovative analytical tools.

Central to this theoretical innovation is the concept of Narrative-Driven Moral Configuration, which will be employed as a core lens to examine how Cao’s films fabricate, sustain, and critically pressure frameworks of moral meaning. Furthermore, the Mirroring–Drifting Theory will be utilized to elucidate how Cao’s audiovisual language guides the audience’s gaze. Conceptual frameworks such as the “sound–space narrative matrix” will serve as auxiliary analytical tools.

Ultimately, this research seeks to move beyond descriptive case studies to address the question: How is a Chinese paradigm of authorship possible? Through layered analysis, this study argues that Cao’s creative practice exemplifies a distinctly Chinese model of authorship, forged within dynamic tensions between globalization and localization, artistry and commerce.

1.3 Research Innovation and Theoretical Contribution

Director Cao Baoping occupies a distinctive position in contemporary Chinese cinema. This dissertation is grounded in film studies and oriented toward close textual analysis. All other theoretical and cultural frameworks are introduced only insofar as they serve this central commitment. The project engages four interconnected areas: (1) film studies as the core field; (2) philosophy and critical theory as supporting resources; (3) cultural and social analysis as contextual grounding; and (4) interdisciplinary methodologies as mid-level tools.

At the theoretical level, this study seeks to transform fragmented commentary into a unified analytical framework. By proposing new conceptual tools, it aims to establish a foundation for the localization of Chinese film theory.

Previous studies often focus on individual works but fail to present a coherent account of his continuous aesthetic logic. By treating Cao’s major works as an interconnected “textual system”, this study employs comprehensive close reading to chart an “aesthetic map of Cao’s cinema”, clarifying the evolution of his themes and styles.

Methodologically, the study emphasizes the localized adaptation of theoretical tools. Its core lies in the creative extension of the Mirroring–Drifting Theory. Originally proposed by Lin Niantong to describe the aesthetics of classical Chinese painting in cinematic space (Lin 1991, 45), this research integrates its physical, psychological, and cultural dimensions with psychoanalytic film theory—particularly Jacques Lacan’s “mirror stage” (Lacan 1977)—within an ethical framework. Through this synthesis, it constructs an explanatory spectator–actor ethical–cognitive model.

The recurrent use of tracking shots, subjective points of view, and mirror gazes in Cao's films creates a complex "mirroring" structure. This not only corresponds to self-identification but also guides viewers to "drift" among the psychological states and ethical standpoints of multiple characters. By analyzing this mechanism, the study explores how the viewer undergoes cognitive "drift" regarding justice and moral choice, enriching theoretical discussion of the film-audience relationship.

Building upon this, the research proposes several original mid-range theoretical tools. The concept of ethical suspension describes a key narrative strategy. Cao's characters are frequently positioned within intense conflicts between ethical imperatives and modern demands. Rather than resolving these tensions, he intentionally suspends ethical resolution, exposing the complexity of moral dilemmas themselves. Clarifying this concept provides a new lens for analyzing moral narratives.

Furthermore, the study introduces the sound-space narrative matrix. The sound design in Cao's films serves not merely as background but constructs cinematic space, propels narrative, and externalizes psychological tension. This matrix provides a systematic framework for analyzing how sound interacts with physical, social, and psychological spaces.

Finally, the overarching theoretical ambition is to argue for a Chinese Authorship Paradigm. While auteur theory traditionally emphasizes resistance to industrial constraints, this study contends that Cao's practice exemplifies a new paradigm generated within the Chinese context. This paradigm functions within the film system—embracing market demands and genre conventions while carving out space for personal expression through sophisticated textual control. By mediating among directorial intention, genre structure, social critique, and cultural symbolism, Cao demonstrates a model harmonizing artistic integrity, commercial viability, and cultural engagement. This model contributes to the localized reconstruction of auteur theory and offers a new interpretive perspective for understanding contemporary Chinese filmmaking.

1.4 Research Objectives and Core Questions

Building upon the preceding review, this study seeks to establish a coherent research pathway for an in-depth interpretation of Cao's film aesthetics and authorial practices. The overarching objective is to construct a dual analytical framework integrating meticulous textual analysis with macro-level theoretical exploration, elucidating the aesthetic characteristics of Cao's films and extracting representative paradigmatic features of Chinese filmmaking.

To realize this aim, the study formulates three interconnected research objectives, each corresponding to a core research question.

1.4.1 Clarifying Aesthetic Characteristics through Systematic Textual Analysis

The first objective is to systematically map and define Cao's stylistic signature by decoding the aesthetic language of his representative works. This aims to move beyond fragmented

scholarship through in-depth analyses of key films across his creative trajectory, delineating overall features and evolutionary patterns.

Core Question: What are the iconic and consistent aesthetic characteristics of Cao's cinema, and how are these features realized through specific audiovisual languages including cinematography, editing, sound, and performance?

To address this, the study employs close textual analysis (Bordwell & Thompson 2017, 45). Subsequent chapters will focus on representative films, extending analysis from thematic interpretation to micro-level examination of formal elements. This stage provides an empirical foundation for theoretical interpretation.

1.4.2 Exploring Authorial Mechanisms within Industrial and Generic Frameworks

The second objective is to probe the underlying mechanisms of Cao's authorial practice and analyze how authorship operates within generic and industrial frameworks. Core Questions: What constitutes the specific mechanism of Cao's authorial practice? How does he utilize and transform genre frameworks to embed social critique and authorial signature? How does this practice exemplify an effective strategy for the localization of genre filmmaking in China?

Addressing these requires an intersectional analysis bridging creative strategy and industrial context. The study examines how Cao interweaves personal motifs—fascination with human paradoxes, critical engagement with justice—into commercially appealing narratives. By elucidating such mechanisms, the research aims to provide a strategic reference for understanding how directors maintain artistic autonomy within commercial systems.

1.4.3 Constructing a Localized Authorship Paradigm

The third objective aspires toward theoretical integration and paradigm construction. Based on preceding analyses, the study seeks to develop a theoretical framework for interpreting “Chinese authorship”, proposing a localized paradigm capable of interpreting the creative logic of contemporary Chinese filmmaking.

Core Questions: How can interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives be integrated into a coherent multi-dimensional framework for analyzing Cao's works? Can his creative practice be theorized as a “Chinese authorship paradigm” formed within tensions between globalization and localization? What are its essential connotations?

To pursue these, the study fosters dialogue among theories. For instance, Lacan's mirror stage theory will be examined in conjunction with Lin Niantong's Mirroring–Drifting Theory to illuminate ethical dimensions of gaze. Ethical principles will be introduced to uncover cultural roots of “ethical suspension”. In the conclusion, these threads will be synthesized to articulate the Cao Baoping Paradigm as a representative case of a Chinese authorship paradigm—one

achieving dynamic balance among personal expression, aesthetic innovation, social concern, and market viability.

1.5 Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

To ensure analytical rigor and theoretical depth, this study adopts a comprehensive framework combining micro-level textual interpretation with macro-level conceptual construction, aligning with its overall objectives.

1.5.1 Research Methods

This study employs a diversified set of research methods constituting a coherent analytical framework.

Close textual analysis serves as the methodological cornerstone, conducting meticulous shot-by-shot examination of Cao's representative works. Attention is paid to visual style—handheld cinematography, lighting, composition—and creative use of sound, exploring how these elements construct narrative tension, emotional depth, and moral complexity. A comparative analytical approach develops vertical and horizontal inquiries. Vertically, it traces stylistic evolution across creative periods. Horizontally, it situates his work within broader cinematic contexts, drawing comparative insights to highlight Cao's unique capacity to reconcile auteurist expression with genre conventions locally.

The auteur-director approach constitutes the central methodological axis. Adapted to Chinese conditions, it proceeds from an examination of the director's entire creative trajectory, elucidating authorship through consistent thematic engagement, persistent stylistic strategies, and comprehensive production control.

Theoretical construction and innovation is a crucial commitment. The research engages theories in creative dialogue, building upon Lin Niantong's Mirroring-Drifting Theory (1991) and integrating it with psychoanalytic film theory and ethical philosophy to develop an original interpretive model. Concurrently, it introduces the concept of "ethical suspension". Ultimately, these explorations converge toward constructing a "Chinese authorship paradigm".

1.5.2 Theoretical Framework

To transcend fragmented commentary on Cao's films, deepen the systematic understanding of his "authorship", and reveal the internal logic that links his distinctive visual style to broader socio-cultural expressions, this study constructs a multi-layered and three-dimensional theoretical framework. This framework integrates three foundational concepts with five core theoretical and innovative tools, collectively designed to provide solid methodological support and a coherent interpretive pathway for the subsequent case analyses.

The three foundational concepts constitute the theoretical bedrock of this research, offering general perspectives for textual interpretation and establishing conceptual continuity with

existing film scholarship. First, the study adopts a dialectical stance toward the Auteur Paradigm, navigating between auteur theory that emphasizes the director as the primary source of cinematic meaning and post-structuralist revisions that regard the “author” as an analytical construct rather than a fixed origin of meaning. Within this dialectic, key indicators such as directorial control—evident in Cao’s comprehensive command over script, performance, and audiovisual style—narrative consistency—reflected in recurring explorations of law and sentiment, moral paradoxes, and human struggle under pressure—and aesthetic preference—such as the use of handheld cinematography, strong light-dark contrast, and accelerated editing rhythms (cf. Bordwell 2016)—will serve as analytical dimensions for examining how Cao Baoping maintains a distinct stylistic identity within the generic and industrial frameworks of crime, suspense, and family-ethics films.

Furthermore, particular attention will be devoted to Cao’s unique positioning as a “marginal auteur”⁷ in contemporary Chinese cinema. Situated neither entirely outside the system as an underground auteur, nor fully embedded within commercial formulae as a genre craftsman, Cao operates at the interstices of the mainstream. By strategically appropriating and transforming genre conventions, he creates a hybrid space that allows for both artistic autonomy and critical engagement. This perspective helps to delineate his subtle negotiation between industrial constraint and authorial expression within the evolving landscape of the Chinese film industry.

Second, the Film Language System serves as both the material vehicle of authorial thought and the external manifestation of directorial style. Drawing on the formalist tradition articulated by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (Bordwell & Thompson 2017), this study undertakes a detailed decoding of Cao’s audiovisual language. The analysis operates on multiple levels: At the visual level, it explores how lighting, camera movement, and composition contribute to narrative tension and emotional atmosphere; At the acoustic level, it examines the expressive deployment of silence, the narrative role of ambient sound, and the interplay between dialogue and music; At the spatiotemporal level, it investigates how Cao constructs psychological and social spaces through his handling of character-environment relationships. Collectively, these dimensions demonstrate how formal precision translates into affective and ethical resonance.

Third, the study regards Film Aesthetic Reconstruction as the highest manifestation of Cao’s authorship, focusing on how he revitalizes established aesthetic paradigms through cross-genre synthesis and localized adaptation. This involves the fusion of the narrative formulae of crime films, the moral complexity of family dramas, and the inner tension of psychological thrillers. Central to this reconstruction is its localization: Cao combines noir sensibility with the realist texture of Chinese social life, transforming overt violence into restrained, psychologically charged “cold violence.” Moreover, he utilizes narrative form to build and interrogate complex moral worlds. This synthesis of form and indigenous narrative-ethical experimentation

⁷ “Marginal auteur”: a filmmaker positioned between mainstream and independent cinema, navigating industrial constraints while maintaining a distinct authorial voice.

constitutes the generative mechanism of his distinctive visual character and cultural expressivity.

Building upon these foundational concepts, the framework next introduces five core theoretical and innovative tools, designed to more precisely engage with the aesthetic and ethical fabric of Cao's cinematic practice.

The first and most central analytical tool is the concept of Narrative-Driven Moral Configuration. A central premise of this study is that Cao Baoping's social critique is executed foremost through a mastery of form. To analyze this, the dissertation employs the concept of Narrative-Driven Moral Configuration. This concept posits that a film's narrative system—its architecture, point-of-view, and rhythm—does not merely convey moral dilemmas but actively fabricates the very framework within which such dilemmas acquire meaning and tension. Cao's films, from "The Dead End" to "Cock and Bull", are not about "applying" established or modern ethics; rather, they are intricate experiments in how narrative can build and unbuild a world of moral coordinates. This study will trace how Cao's formal choices—nonlinear plotting, restricted perspectives, and strategic omissions—create these configurations, only to subject them to intense pressure, revealing their fragility and, by extension, the fractured moral landscapes of contemporary China they reflect. Thus, "Narrative-Driven Moral Configuration" becomes the key lens for understanding his "critical-formalist" method, where the critique is embedded in the process of storytelling itself.

The second theoretical tool is the localized reconstruction of the Mirroring–Drifting Theory. Originating from Lin Niantong's formulation, this study reinterprets and expands the theory within a localized context by integrating psychoanalytic film theory. Specifically, it aligns the "psychological mirror" with Lacan's "mirror stage", to examine processes of self-identification and alienation that characters undergo under the gaze of the Other, while understanding the "physical mirror" as a visual materialization of the Symbolic Order. A key innovation here is the introduction of the viewer's ethical–cognitive drifting, wherein the spectator, guided by Cao's cinematic construction—his Narrative-Driven Moral Configurations—oscillates between emotional identification (Imaginary) and moral reflection (Symbolic).

Third, this study introduces the original concept of ethical suspension to articulate a key mechanism within Cao's moral configurations. This narrative technique deliberately delays or withholds definitive moral judgment, rejecting binary oppositions of good and evil to create interpretive space for the audience's ethical engagement. Manifestations of ethical suspension include characters with conflicted motivations, open-ended conclusions, and unresolved moral dilemmas. Through this strategy, Cao's films evolve from moralistic storytelling into open arenas for ethical reflection and emotional inquiry, directly serving the construction and deconstruction of his narrative-driven moral worlds.

Fourth, to address the nuanced interaction between sound and space frequently observed in Cao's cinema, this research develops the Sound–Space Narrative Matrix. This analytical model elucidates how sonic and spatial elements work synergistically to shape narrative rhythm and

psychological intensity. The dynamic interplay of sound and space often follows a structural pattern of “repression–alienation–breakthrough”, thereby amplifying the internal conflict between characters’ emotions and their external environments, and elevating sound from a supportive technique to a narrative agent in its own right.

Fifth, the framework explores the construction pathway of a localized aesthetics of violence. Unlike the stylized approaches of certain global filmmakers, Cao’s depiction of violence operates within a restrained and realist register. His violence often occurs off-screen or through indirect implication, emphasizing psychological aftermath over visual spectacle. This “de-sensationalized” aesthetic transforms acts of violence into catalysts for ethical contemplation and social critique within his moral configurations, shifting their function from mere narrative propulsion to a site of philosophical reflection on human frailty and systemic injustice.

Finally, synthesizing insights from all preceding dimensions, the study aims to conceptualize a model of the auteur director within contemporary Chinese cinema. Cao’s creative trajectory exemplifies that an effective Chinese authorship paradigm is not a direct replication of other auteurist models, but a locally negotiated construct formed under the intersecting pressures of industry, censorship, market, and culture. Within this paradigm, directorial autonomy is realized through negotiation rather than resistance; stylistic continuity emerges as a process of translating local cultural codes into cinematic language, crucially through formal innovations like the Narrative-Driven Moral Configuration; and cultural expression attains depth when it courageously engages with social realities through the pressure applied to these fabricated moral worlds. Through a comprehensive reading of Cao’s authorship, this framework aspires to contribute a theoretically grounded and culturally sensitive model for understanding localized cinematic authorship in the Chinese context.

Chapter 2 The Cinematic Authorship of Cao Baoping

Since its inception over a century ago, cinema has experienced numerous fluctuations but has ultimately become a vital element of daily entertainment, particularly in China. Despite disruptions due to political and historical factors, as well as competition from newer media like television and the internet, Chinese cinema witnessed a significant revival in the 21st century. The blockbuster era initiated by the "Fifth Generation" directors rekindled public enthusiasm for movie-going. This revival spurred the growth of various genres, though the dominance of commercial films also led to a polarized critical reception. In this context, a new generation of directors emerged, willing to experiment. While commercially successful figures such as Ning Hao 宁浩 and Wen Muye 文牧野 gained prominence, established filmmakers also adapted to the evolving commercial landscape. Notably, even the Sixth Generation directors—once defined by their oppositional stance and rebellious aesthetics—gradually began to accommodate market demands and industrial norms, a tendency that became even more pronounced among the younger generation that followed. Within this broader process of adaptation, Cao stands out as a particularly revealing case. Although his work shares the Sixth Generation's critical engagement with social realities and marginal experiences, he differs from them in his sustained effort to address socially critical themes without positioning himself in overt opposition to the institutional system. Instead, Cao has consistently sought negotiation and communication with China's film censorship framework, striving to preserve critical depth while remaining within the boundaries of official regulation. In doing so, he has achieved a delicate balance between creative autonomy and institutional oversight, exemplifying a pragmatic mode of authorship in contemporary Chinese cinema.

This chapter will examine the life, experiences, and creative trajectory of filmmaker Cao Baoping. The first subsection provides a brief biography, detailing his background, his journey into film, significant formative experiences, and his three primary professional roles. The second section offers an overview of his filmography, focusing on narrative plots. The third subsection analyzes the distinctive creative characteristics evident in his work, exploring the cultural phenomena, introspection, and social commentary within the themes of his five major films: "Trouble Makers", "The Equation of Love and Death", "Einstein and Einstein", "Dead End", and "Cock and Bull".

2.1 Cao Baoping: A Biographical and Professional Profile

Cao Baoping is a Mainland Chinese director, screenwriter, and executive producer. Born in Datong, Shanxi, he enrolled in the Beijing Film Academy's Literature Department in 1985, majoring in playwriting (Baidu Baike-Cao Baoping)⁸. After graduating in 1989, he remained at the academy to teach film screenwriting, a profession he has maintained for over three decades (Baidu Baike-Cao Baoping). Since his official directorial debut in 2001, he has

⁸ Baidu Baike 百度百科 . (n.d.). Cao Baoping 《曹保平》 . (Cao Baoping). Retrieved from <https://baike.baidu.com/item/曹保平/3060288>.

directed films including “Trouble Makers”, “The Equation of Love and Death”, “Einstein and Einstein”, “Dead End”, and “Cock and Bull”. Despite a relatively limited output of six officially released films, Cao Baoping has established himself as a unique figure among Chinese directors by skillfully balancing the artistic integrity of film as a medium with its commercial nature as a product, making him a distinctive representative in the Chinese film industry.

His work has injected vitality into Chinese cinema, demonstrating the possibility of a “healthy” creative approach. He maintains his artistic pursuits while engaging with the realities of the film market, avoiding both blind trend-following for mere commercial gain and the willful alienation of audiences in the name of art. Instead, he actively acknowledges cinema as a commodity and strives to find a balance between artistic expression and market acceptance.

Before enrolling at the Beijing Film Academy, Cao Baoping, as the only son in his family, held a staff position in the local municipal government—a coveted “secure job” at the time (Kefan Qingting-Zhuimengzhe Ye: Cao Baoping 2)⁹. However, office clerical work did not align with his aspirations. While working, he began writing novels for amusement. Having read *Dream of the Red Chamber* 红楼梦 in his youth, he authored a biography of Qing Wen and a historically-based biography of Shi Dakai, manuscripts he reportedly still keeps (Kefan Qingting-Zhuimengzhe Ye: Cao Baoping 2). After a period of writing and growing dissatisfaction with his office job, he learned about the Beijing Film Academy’s entrance exam and decided to apply (Kefan Qingting-Zhuimengzhe Ye: Cao Baoping 2). In 1985, he retook the college entrance exam with the hope of gaining admission and pursuing his desired career, a decision that caused anxiety for his traditional parents. His mother reportedly even hoped he would fail, so he would remain in his hometown with his stable job and start a family (Kefan Qingting-Zhuimengzhe Ye: Cao Baoping 2).

Uncertain of his exam results and wishing to avoid potential embarrassment, Cao Baoping concealed his plans from his superiors and took thirteen days off to secretly take the academy’s art entrance examination (Kefan Qingting-Zhuimengzhe Ye: Cao Baoping 2). Only after receiving his admission notice did he confess to his leaders and request the transfer of his personnel file, a process that faced multiple rejections and criticisms before finally being approved, allowing him to enroll (Kefan Qingting-Zhuimengzhe Ye: Cao Baoping 2). This episode reveals a pragmatic and cautious side of his character; he is not one to take reckless risks but plans each step carefully, an approach that would later characterize his creative career. Unlike some contemporaries who pursued independent filmmaking paths, he first worked in television drama production, accumulating experience and ensuring a stable income while patiently waiting for the right opportunity to transition to film (Kefan Qingting-Zhuimengzhe Ye: Cao Baoping 2). He has always been a contradictory figure, wanting to work within the system while also seeking to change it. This tension has sometimes made it difficult for his

⁹ Kefan Qingting 可凡倾听. (2015). Zhuimengzhe Ye: Cao Baoping Shang/Xia 《追梦者也：曹保平》上. (Dream Chaser: Cao Baoping, Part 1). <https://v.qq.com/x/cover/hzgks3wboviql5v/j0021qa2qox.html?ptag=mzhan>

innovative works to navigate censorship barriers. Cao Baoping reflects a significant segment of the Chinese populace in this. He recalled in an interview (Kefan Qingting-Zhuimengzhe Ye: Cao Baoping 2), "I had to pass by my office to get to the examination center, and I was afraid my colleagues would find out, so I deliberately got up early and took a long detour. On the first day of the exam, I felt more ecstatic than my sister, who took the exam with me, but my mother was very sad. The next day, after the math exam, my mother was overjoyed to learn I hadn't done well and cooked a big meal to celebrate". Such experiences seemingly taught him the importance of caution in pursuing his dreams: to insist on making the films he loves without completely breaking from the system.

As a teenager, Cao Baoping watched a vast number of films from various countries and genres (Kefan Qingting-Zhuimengzhe Ye: Cao Baoping 1)¹⁰. This extensive viewing provided a broad foundation for his future creations, allowing him to work across multiple genres—including romance, ethics, and crime—and incorporate diverse subjects into his distinctive style. His youthful passion for cinema even led to mischievous attempts to watch movies for free, such as re-gluing used ticket stubs. The fear and embarrassment of being caught during ticket checks left a lasting, albeit humiliating, impression on him, now recalled as a precious memory (Kefan Qingting-Zhuimengzhe Ye: Cao Baoping 2). These formative experiences during his highly curious adolescent years provided a valuable reference point for his development as a director.

Besides directing, teaching has been Cao Baoping's primary occupation since graduation. In 1989, he began working as a playwriting professor in the Department of Literature (Baidu Baike-Cao Baoping). While teaching, he meticulously refined his screenplays over many years, enhancing character depth, narrative fluency, and plot coherence. However, an over-reliance on dramatic tension sometimes led to a detachment from reality in his early screenplays, resulting in films that felt less grounded. With the exception of *Einstein and Einstein*, his other works, though often adapted from real events, can feel stylized or distanced from reality in their screen presentation. While he may not have achieved the same level of international artistic acclaim as Jia Zhangke or comparable commercial success, he has carved out a unique position by subtly achieving a balance between the two.

In his role as an educator, Cao Baoping's practical efforts are evident. As a jury member for script competitions hosted by the Beijing Film Academy, he actively guides students and supports outstanding works (Wu; Cao 2016, 19-25). He is known for mentoring and cherishing his students, inspiring them to participate in competitions. For promising scripts, he is willing to act as a producer and even personally select and recommend production teams (Hongyu; wewo 2014, 18-19). Furthermore, he served as a reviewer for the 11th FIRST Youth Film Festival, seeking out excellent screenplays and creating opportunities for newcomers (人民网 11th FIRST Youth Film Festival 2017)¹¹.

¹⁰ Kefan Qingting 可凡倾听. (2015). *Zhuimengzhe Ye: Cao Baoping Shang/Xia 《追梦者也：曹保平》上*. (Dream Chaser: Cao Baoping, Part 2). https://www.iqiyi.com/v_19rw13vjb8.html

¹¹ Renmin Wang 人民网. (2017). 11th FIRST Qingnian Dianyingzhan 《第 11 届 FIRST 青年电影展》. (11th FIRST Youth Film Festival). Retrieved from <http://culture.people.com.cn/GB/n1/2017/0505/c22219-29255496.html>

Prior to his film career, Cao Baoping accumulated over a decade of experience making television series (Baidu Baike-Cao Baoping). This provided him with financial stability and ample time to refine his creative approach. The income from television and teaching distinguished his situation from the early financial struggles faced by many "Sixth Generation" directors. Consequently, he lacked their almost "urgent" need for awards and recognition. His financial security also fostered a more pragmatic, rather than resentful, attitude towards censorship, the market, and audiences. Unlike many of his peers who might resist or defy the system, he could reportedly accept "suggestions" from censorship authorities with relative ease and patience, making revisions rather than choosing to break away entirely (Wu; Cao 2016, 19-25). Amidst the Sixth Generation's collective identity, he pursued his preferred cinematic form: one that reflects reality without sensationalizing it, tackles universal themes through unique perspectives, features marginalized yet socially resonant characters, and avoids overtly arty pretensions.

As a film director, Cao Baoping is less internationally known than his Fifth or Sixth Generation predecessors, focusing more on the domestic Chinese market. His early film *The Equation of Love and Death* premiered at the 56th San Sebastián International Film Festival, where he won the Best Director Award (Baidu Baike-Cao Baoping). His later film *Einstein and Einstein* was nominated for the Crystal Bear at the 64th Berlin International Film Festival and received a Special Mention from the International Jury (Baidu Baike-Cao Baoping). Furthermore, "Cock and Bull" won him the Best Director and Best Screenplay awards at the German Film Festival in China (Baidu Baike-Cao Baoping). His reputation within China is substantial, arguably surpassing that of some Sixth Generation directors, and he is considered one of the industry's most respected figures. As of 2018, Cao has been nominated for China's three most prestigious film awards—the Golden Rooster Award, the Hundred Flowers Award, and the Huabiao Award (Baidu Baike-Cao Baoping). He has also guided four actors to win major film awards, earning him the title "film star maker" (Jiemian Xinwen 2018)¹².

Cao Baoping's early television dramas primarily explored family bonds, historical events, and figures, aligning with his pre-college literary writing style (Kefan Qingting-Zhuimengzhe Ye: Cao Baoping 1). He has stated that he approaches television dramas with the same seriousness as films, ensuring a natural and smooth transition when he eventually began filmmaking (Kefan Qingting-Zhuimengzhe Ye: Cao Baoping 1).

As a producer, Cao Baoping's role is less public-facing. He often serves as the producer for his own works; according to his filmography (see Appendix 1), he produced half of his early TV dramas and half of his films. This allows for more effective budget allocation and greater creative freedom, though it also tests his overall coordination skills. Beyond his projects, Cao has also chosen to supervise and produce film and television projects for a few newcomers

¹² Jiemian Xinwen 界面新闻. (2018). Yingdi Zhizaoyi Cao Baoping 《“影帝制造机”曹保平》. ("Actor-Maker" Cao Baoping). Retrieved from <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1618805236669369854&wfr=spider&for=pc>

(Jiemian Xinwen 2020)¹³. Given the scarcity of relevant information and the ongoing status of some productions, this article will not delve further into these endeavors.

2.2 An Overview of Cao Baoping's Filmography

Cao Baoping stands as one of the most distinctive auteur directors in contemporary Chinese cinema—an artist whose authorial identity was not established overnight but gradually constructed through a body of work characterized by remarkable thematic, stylistic, and narrative consistency. To delineate the formation and evolution of his directorial signature within a relatively stable industrial environment, this study focuses on five core works released before the outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020: “The Troublemakers” (2007), “The Equation of Love and Death” (2008), “Einstein and Einstein” (2013), “The Dead End” (2015), and ““Cock and Bull”” (2016).

This selection is defined by a clear temporal demarcation: the post-pandemic Chinese film industry underwent profound transformations in production modes, distribution systems, and aesthetic tendencies. Restricting the research to pre-pandemic works thus enables a more pristine examination of the authorial signature that Cao refined and consolidated during his creative prime. An overview of these five films reveals not only his growing technical sophistication but also a persistent creative thread—his continual negotiation between the demands of commercial genre cinema and the aspirations of serious auteur expression, all while incisively dissecting contemporary Chinese social realities and human predicaments.

Cao Baoping's authorial journey began with his debut feature, *The Troublemakers*. Although the film initially received limited market attention, it laid the cornerstone for his later work through its raw, potent realism and distinctive black humor. The narrative focuses on a remote village dominated by the local bullies known as the “Xiong Family Four Brothers,” depicting the efforts of the village Party Secretary, Ye Guangrong, to rally the villagers in a seemingly hopeless act of rebellion. Already in this early film, one can discern the hallmark traits of Cao's future work: a highly compressed narrative timeframe (the story unfolds within a single day), an ordinary protagonist under extreme pressure, and a narrative core that seeks hope amid despair.

As Zhang Huiyu notes, the film “uses exaggerated and absurd techniques to expose the ossification of grassroots power structures and the survival strategies of ordinary people within them” (Zhang 2010, 88). Yet Cao's mastery lies in his refusal to present the story as pure tragedy or straightforward social drama. Instead, he injects a disquieting sense of comedy through rapid editing, handheld camerawork, and the characters' farcical responses to extreme situations—an artistic strategy that makes his social critique more piercing. Thus, “The

¹³ Jiemian Xinwen 界面新闻. (2020). FIRST Qingnian Dianyingzhan Xunlianying: Zai Keneng de Lujing Zhong Xuanze Yige 《FIRST 青年电影展训练营：在可能的路径中选择一个》. (FIRST Youth Film Festival Training Camp: Choosing a Path of Possibility). Retrieved from <https://m.jiemian.com/article/4797656.html>

Troublemakers” may be regarded as the archetypal work of Cao’s authorial style, marking the initial establishment of his creative trajectory that mediates between art and commerce, realism and drama.

Following this demonstration of his aptitude for realist storytelling in “The Troublemakers”, Cao Baoping achieved a crucial breakthrough with “The Equation of Love and Death”, successfully embedding his authorial vision within a more market-oriented genre framework. On the surface, the film is a hybrid of suspense, crime, and romance: a female taxi driver, Li Mi, desperately searches for her boyfriend who disappeared four years earlier, while a web of strange events and characters connected to him unfolds. Yet Cao’s ambition far exceeds the telling of a convoluted plot. He uses genre conventions as narrative bait, guiding the audience into a labyrinth of emotions—love, obsession, longing, and redemption.

As Li Xun observes, “The Equation of Love and Death” contains, beneath the surface of its genre narrative, a profound meditation on the alienation of modern emotions and the dilemma of communication (Chen 2009, 34). Through Li Mi’s almost pathological perseverance, Cao explores how emotion can become a double-edged force that both sustains life and erodes reason. His narrative structure—with its multiple perspectives and layered reversals—not only sustains suspense but also lends the story, once the truth emerges, a fateful and tragic undertone. This film marks Cao’s successful discovery of a delicate equilibrium between authorial expression and market appeal, demonstrating that profound thematic exploration and high entertainment value are not mutually exclusive.

Building upon this success, Cao Baoping created “Einstein and Einstein” (completed in 2013, released in 2018), widely regarded as his most personal and critically powerful film for its stark social observation and deep humanistic concern. The film strips away all genre trappings, adopting an almost documentary-like detachment to portray the “disciplining” of a 13-year-old girl, Li Wan, during adolescence. Centered on the seemingly simple event of searching for a lost dog, the film meticulously depicts how the adult world—under the logic of “it’s for your own good”—systematically wears down the edges of youth, compelling her to “grow up” through successive compromises.

A highly symbolic moment occurs when Li Wan is forced to eat a piece of dog meat at a family dinner—an act signifying her final submission to the rules of the adult world. Dai Jinhua has noted that contemporary Chinese youth narratives often “reveal the silent violence encountered during processes of individual growth and socialization” (Dai 2014, 117). *Einstein and Einstein* represents this “silent violence” in its most unflinching form. It is not only a microhistory of family education but also an epitome of the collective coming-of-age experience of a generation in China. The edge of its realism is sharpened precisely by its emotional restraint and commitment to authentic detail.

If “*Einstein and Einstein*” represents the apex of Cao’s social critique, “*The Dead End*” stands as his most seamless fusion of authorship, genre mastery, and commercial success. The film—a crime thriller about a seven-year-old unsolved family massacre—garnered both critical and

box-office acclaim, elevating Cao's influence to a broader public level. On the surface, this film contains all the hallmarks of an accomplished genre film: tight pacing, a complex mystery, stellar performances (particularly the dynamic between Duan Yihong and Deng Chao), and intense dramatic conflict. Yet once again, Cao transcends the genre, transforming it into a philosophical meditation on sin, punishment, redemption, and the moral ambiguities of human nature.

Each character bears the weight of guilt and moral entanglement, struggling in the liminal space between legality and human sentiment. As Chen Xiaoyun argues, The success of "Dead End" lies in its use of the crime narrative to probe the pervasive moral anxiety and identity crisis of China's transitional society (Chen 2016, 62). Through gloomy lighting, humid urban spaces, and handheld tracking shots, Cao constructs a suffocating visual atmosphere that externalizes the characters' inner torment and guilt. Thus, "Dead End" solidified Cao Baoping's position as an "auteur of genre cinema", proving that his authorial signature could elevate even the most mainstream narrative forms.

Following this triumph, Cao extended and deepened his authorial style with "'Cock and Bull'" (2016). While continuing the crime theme, the film introduces stronger elements of black humor and absurdity, forming a uniquely structured tragicomedy. Through an interlocking, chaptered narrative, it reconstructs the truth of a murder from the perspectives of three characters: the mechanic Song Lao'er, the hoodlum Wang Youquan, and the hitman Dong Xiaofeng. This multi-perspective, puzzle-like structure not only sustains suspense and humor but also serves a deeper thematic purpose—exposing the limitations and contingencies of individuals trapped in the torrent of fate. Each character, constrained by asymmetric information, finds themselves in situations at once laughable and dire. The figure of the killer Dong Xiaofeng (played by Zhang Yi), whose fate intertwines tragedy and comedy, becomes the key vehicle for the film's critique of social injustice, such as real estate fraud. As Wang Yichuan remarks, Cao here "closely intertwines the survival predicaments of the lower strata with the absurdity of fate, achieving another incisive puncture of social reality through irony and indignation" (Wang 2017, 105). "'Cock and Bull'" demonstrates that Cao's authorship is not static but constantly evolving, exploring new narrative forms and tonal variations while steadfastly maintaining his core concerns, thereby enriching and expanding the dimensions of his creative map.

In summary, from "Troublemakers" to "'Cock and Bull'", these five pre-pandemic works vividly chart the maturation and diversification of Cao Baoping's auteur trajectory. Throughout, he has negotiated an intricate balance between artistic pursuit and commercial logic, constructing intense and suspenseful narrative spaces through his signature style of dramatic realism. More importantly, his cinematic gaze has persistently centered on the individual within China's shifting social landscape. Whether portraying the struggling village official, the obsessed lover, the disciplined adolescent, the guilt-ridden fugitive, or the absurd hitman, Cao is committed to excavating the depths of human complexity amid social fissures and moral dilemmas. Collectively, these five films—like prisms refracting light from different

angles—illuminate the distinct yet unified creative vision that defines Cao Baoping’s irreplaceable authorial status in the history of Chinese cinema.

2.3 The Creative Signature of Cao Baoping

Cao Baoping’s films are consistently personalized and rooted in compelling narratives. He specializes in balancing strong dramatic conflict with a realist visual sensibility, transforming the anxieties of marginalized individuals under the weight of social pressures into poignant cinematic imagery. Through this lens, audiences are prompted not only to recognize the existence of societal problems but also to reflect upon them critically.

2.3.1 Navigating the Commerce – Art Spectrum

Cao Baoping’s films exhibit a dual nature: they possess strong narrative appeal grounded in a realistic portrayal of Chinese social issues, while also magnifying and intensifying these realities to heighten dramatic tension. This deliberate amplification allows him to balance artistic ambition and audience engagement, creating what may be described as a distinctive “Cao style”.

In contemporary Chinese cinema, a persistent tension exists between artistry and commercialism: pursuing artistic integrity risks alienating the mass market, while surrendering to commercial formulas leads to aesthetic dilution. For Cao, however, the market system is not a constraint but a medium through which artistry and commerce can be reconciled. His works, while appealing to mainstream audiences, maintain a consistent personal vision and provide a model for integrating individual expression within commercial frameworks in the broader context of Chinese film development.

This equilibrium between art and commerce depends on both market dynamics and the director’s aesthetic choices. Following China’s rapid economic growth since the Reform and Opening Up, marketization has “broken the rules of social resource allocation, and the continuous differentiation between the rich and the poor has gradually enlarged the size of the bottom class in society” (Sun 2002, 18-26). The widening wealth gap and the emergence of new class structures have drawn attention to the social struggles of the underclass. In this environment, the Sixth Generation directors have shifted their focus toward realism, portraying contemporary social conditions and encouraging public reflection through cinematic mirrors of reality.

As Postman observed in *Entertaining Ourselves to Death*: “The problem is not that television presents us with entertaining subject matter but that all subject matter is presented as entertaining. Entertainment is the supra-ideology of all discourse on television. No matter what is depicted or from what point of view, the overarching presumption is that it is there for our amusement and pleasure” (Postman 1985, 87). Postman further noted that while film, records, and radio are also devoted to entertainment, television’s totalizing nature makes it especially

influential. This “era of generalized entertainment” (泛娱乐化时代)¹⁴ has led audiences to reflect on whether their relentless pursuit of amusement has rendered them, in Postman’s phrase, “a species entertaining itself to death”. Consequently, aesthetic fatigue with mass entertainment has spurred audiences to seek works of deeper social resonance, enabling the rise of the Sixth Generation’s realist cinema. Among them, Cao Baoping stands out for his strategic negotiation between realism and popular accessibility.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Cao has distanced himself from the “rebellion and confrontation” (Cao 2016, 19-25) that defined much of Sixth Generation filmmaking. Recognizing early on the impossibility of detaching from China’s commercial system and mass audiences, he instead softened this rebellious stance and approached the mainstream. His films often adopt genre conventions—particularly crime and drama—while preserving artistic subtlety through nuanced characterization and imagery. As Cao himself has described, his creative position lies “between self-expression and commodity” (Cao 2016, 19-25), a liminal space he calls the borderland.

Cao’s narratives typically arise from realistic settings but are charged with heightened dramatic intensity, exploring the moral ambiguity of human nature and the thin line between good and evil. The film becomes a mirror of the real world, offering both reflection and catharsis. Although his stories often revolve around crime and social realism, his characters usually receive a form of poetic justice, satisfying the audience’s moral expectations. As Jiao Xiongping notes, Cao’s work is “rooted in realism, approaching the characters and examining their state of being—bursting with humanity amid pain and deadlock, yet without a way out”(Jiao 2008, 153).

These qualities make Cao’s films both intellectually stimulating and commercially viable. They merge entertainment with moral reflection, fulfilling the dual role of cinema as art and commodity. His subtle use of dark humor further enhances this balance. According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, black humor—or black comedy—“juxtaposes morbid or ghastly elements with comical ones to underscore the senselessness or futility of life”. In Cao’s films, this humor conceals tragedy beneath comedy, creating a layered emotional response that is simultaneously absurd and poignant. Through irony and postmodern absurdity (Wulitou)¹⁵, he crafts narratives that provoke laughter while stirring sorrow and empathy.

¹⁴ This “era of generalized entertainment” (泛娱乐化时代) has led audiences to reflect on whether their relentless pursuit of amusement has rendered them, in Postman’s phrase, “a species entertaining itself to death”. See Liu, H. (2017). The Pan-Entertainment Paradox in China’s Media Culture. *International Journal of Communication*, 11, 2105–2106.

¹⁵ Wulitou means nonsense or “mo lei tau” (Cantonese), genre of humor emerging from Hong Kong late in the 20th century. It’s almost the equivalent of “absurd”. Absurdity is logical, but the cause of the logic is ridiculous, such as Hannibal falling in love with Spider-Man because Spider-Man can use his spider’s silk to help him bind the people he wants to kill. However, Wulitou is intended to disrupt logic. For example, breaking a child’s leg because the mother doesn’t want the child to catch a cold by stomping off the blanket.

Another key element of Cao's artistry is his recurring depiction of "the Other"¹⁶. Drawing from philosophical notions of alterity, the Other represents those marginalized from the social mainstream—peasants, criminals, and the dispossessed. In Chinese cultural contexts, "the Other" signifies both disadvantage and humility. By centering these figures, Cao restores visibility to those rendered voiceless by society. His cinematic focus on "lost people"¹⁷ transforms their suffering into collective metaphor, forging spiritual resonance between the audience and the underclass.

As Cheng Qingsong asserts, "What matters to ordinary Chinese people is what should be filmed" (Cheng 2012, 98). Cao Baoping's commitment to portraying the frustrations of ordinary lives reflects his recognition that emotional needs, though simple, are often neglected. When his films overcome censorship barriers to reach theaters, audiences find themselves drawn into self-examination and empathy—a fulfillment both aesthetic and moral.

2.3.2 The Architecture of Dramatic Narrative

In contrast to many Chinese art films that eschew overt drama, Cao Baoping embraces narrative intensity. While directors such as Jia Zhangke, in works like "Xiaowu" 小武 (1997), "Still Life" 三峡好人 (2006), and "Ash Is Purest White" 天注定 (2018), explore subdued emotional landscapes through restrained storytelling, Cao constructs intricate, tension-driven narratives. His approach stands apart from the minimalist tendencies of films like "An Elephant Sitting Still" 大象席地而坐 (2018) and "Kaili Blues" 路边野餐 (2015), which achieve profundity through subtle emotional accumulation rather than action or plot twists.

Cao's insistence on dramatic dynamism is also a strategic response to China's strict censorship environment. Given that filmmaking and censorship operate as opposing systems—expression versus limitation—many art films struggle to obtain domestic release. By contrast, Cao's works are deliberately structured to pass censorship while remaining theatrically engaging, ensuring both visibility and commercial success.

In "Troublemakers", the protagonist Shi Guangrong is perpetually ensnared in contradictory pressures—appeasing violent local figures while mobilizing villagers for resistance. This dual tension sustains continuous dramatic conflict, culminating in a climactic twist: the sudden intervention of the police, a likely concession to censorship requirements, yet one that intensifies the film's dramatic impact.

¹⁶ The Other here is not from Lacan, it refers to *The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, Third Edition, (1999) p. 620.

¹⁷ The "lost people" in this context are similar to but different from, Kurt Lewin's "marginalized people", which emphasize that a person is unique in some way which makes it difficult for others to understand in a short period of time. The lost people refer to people who are not as well off as they would like to be, perhaps due to bad luck or other objective reasons that put them in a material or spiritual state that is not fulfilling. They are usually not in an extreme state mentally, and their failures can be understood creating sympathy.

Similarly, “The Equation of Love and Death” interlaces multiple plotlines—drug trafficking, kidnapping, and romantic obsession—keeping each character under relentless psychological strain. Li Mi’s desperate search for her missing lover intertwines with criminal subplots, creating an escalating web of tension that epitomizes Cao’s maximalist narrative style. His later works, “Dead End” and “Cock and Bull”, sustain this approach: fast-paced, densely plotted, and populated by morally complex characters enmeshed in existential crises. Even background figures are drawn into the momentum, maintaining continuous narrative energy throughout.

2.3.3 Engaging with Social Realities

Siegfried Kracauer’s *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* posits that cinema’s essence lies in its “affinity for the visible world” and its capacity to “record and reveal physical reality” (Kracauer 1960, 28). Cao Baoping’s oeuvre exemplifies this principle, extending realism from physical representation to emotional and moral dimensions. Each of his films engages a specific social issue, transforming lived experience into cinematic discourse.

In “Troublemakers”, Cao portrays systemic bullying and the collusion of violence and political authority within a rural Yunnan village. Despite censorship constraints—which demand the ultimate moral restoration symbolized by the arrival of the police—Cao succeeds in exposing the dynamics of local power and corruption beneath official narratives of justice.

In “The Equation of Love and Death”, “Dead End”, and “Cock and Bull”, Cao adopts the framework of crime cinema to explore themes of moral compromise, disillusionment, and survival among the socially marginalized. His protagonists, driven by love or desperation, fall into cycles of tragedy that reflect the broader conflict between ideals and harsh realities. “Einstein and Einstein” turns inward, examining the collision between adolescent rebellion and patriarchal authority in contemporary China. The film illuminates the psychological pressures of the gaokao system and critiques cultural neglect of youth emotions. In “Dead End” and the “Cock and Bull”, Cao also critiques systemic flaws in China’s judicial and bureaucratic processes. The former reveals the horror of wrongful execution, while the latter exposes deep-seated distrust toward law enforcement, using irony and absurdity to underline the precariousness of justice.

In sum, Cao Baoping’s cinema reveals a compassionate yet incisive vision. Beneath his absurd humor and stylized narratives lies an unwavering concern for ordinary lives. Through his lens, political critique and human vulnerability converge, peeling reality layer by layer like an onion. His films resist populist nationalism and overt ideology, instead illuminating the pain, absurdity, and dignity of everyday existence.

Chapter 3 The Beauty of Fury, The Symphony of Light and Shadow

--exploring the aesthetics of the “Troublemakers”光荣的愤怒 (2006)

3.1 Introduction

Scenario

In Heijincun (黑井村), a remote village in China's Yunnan Province, the villagers live a quiet and depressing life. This peaceful village is firmly controlled by the four brothers of the Xiong family, who, like four ferocious beasts, roam the countryside and do nothing but evil. The eldest Xiong Lao Da 熊老大, brutal and violent, is the bully in the village; the elder Xiong Lao Er 熊老二, cunning and insidious, serves as the village accountant, using his position to enrich himself; the third Xiong Lao San 熊老三, is even more sinister and vicious, as the village chief, not only does not work for the benefit of the villagers but instead, with his brothers in complicity with the oppression of the people; the youngest Xiong Lao Si 熊老四, is a true hooligan to toy with the women for fun. Under the oppression of these four “beasts”, the villagers dare not speak out, living in fear and despair.

However, all this changes silently with the arrival of Ye Guangrong (叶光荣), the newly appointed village clerk. Ye, an upright and courageous grassroots cadre with an idealistic heart, witnesses the villagers' suffering and ignites the fire of justice in his heart. He knows that to change the current situation in Heijincun, it is necessary to eliminate the four beasts, and give the villagers a stable and safe living environment. But the Xiong brother's deep-rooted forces in the village, Ye momentarily difficult to find a breakthrough.

The opportunity finally came. The Xiong brothers kidnapped two women from abroad and intended to sell them for profiteering. This behavior completely enraged Ye, he realized that this was the perfect time to crack down on the Xiong brothers and rescue the kidnapped women. So, he secretly mobilized the masses, to down with the Gang of Four, Heijincun has hope as a code word, organized a brave team of villagers, and planned to raid the Xiong family that night, to catch a spot.

Yet, plans always fail to catch up with changes. The four-pronged arrest operation was full of accidents, some members of the team got lost on the way, some were trapped by Xiong brother's prearranged traps, and the whole operation was a mess. Worse still, the Xiong seemed to sniff the scent of danger and made preparations ahead of time to deal with it. For a while, Ye and his team were desperate, and the capture operation seemed to be about to fail.

Just in the nick of time, the twist of the peak occurred and something unexpected happened. It turns out an undercover hidden among the villagers, has long seen through the Xiong brothers' plot and secretly contacted the police. Just when Ye and his party were in trouble, the police

arrived in time, and the villagers in conjunction with each other, the Xiong brothers were eliminated. The two kidnapped women were also safely rescued, the villagers cheered and celebrated this hard-won victory.

Nevertheless, the joy of victory did not last long. The villagers soon realized that although the Xiong brothers had been eliminated, the problems in Heijingcun had not been fundamentally solved. Corruption still existed, and some officials were inextricably linked to the Xiong brothers, who tried to remain in control of the village and safeguard their interests. It is uncertain whether the newly appointed village cadres will become the next "village hegemony" group.

Cao Baoping's "Troublemakers", set in a mountain village in Yunnan Province, tells the story of Ye, a village clerk, who fights against the bullies, the Xiong family, and his three brothers. Through its extreme touch of realism, the film sublimates the primitive emotion of rage into an aesthetic critique of the alienation of power. Compared to the suspenseful narrative of "Dead End" or the romantic drama of "The Equation of Love and Death", the unique value of "Troublemakers" lies in the fact that it binds the emotion of anger to the language of cinema: the shaking of the hand-held cinematography, the close-ups (Figure 3.1.1) of the faces under the high contrast lighting, and the coarse texture of the dialects together build a universe of repressed fury. This outrage is not only the psychological state of the characters but also the inner driving force behind the structure of the film - as Dai Jinhua puts it, "the lens of the sixth generation of Chinese directors often wanders around the edge of the system, using fury as a blade to cut open the abscess of reality" (Dai 2004, 113). This chapter attempts to reveal how fury, when encoded as an audio-visual symbol, transcends the superficial meaning of social critique and becomes an independent aesthetic category.



Figure 3.1.1

Existing studies on Cao Baoping's films have primarily centered on narrative strategies—such as the localization of crime and suspense genres—or on performance aesthetics exemplified by

actors like Duan Yihong and Deng Chao. Discussions of “Troublemakers”, in particular, have often been reduced to “underbelly narratives” or “political allegories”. Li Xun’s analysis of Chinese realist cinema, for instance, treats the film merely as an example of “regional authenticity restored through dialect” (Li Xun 2010, 91), overlooking its formal experimentation. In the interdisciplinary field, Susan Sontag’s *Regarding the Pain of Others* explores the ethical dilemmas of violent imagery but does not address the aesthetic transformation of fury as a form of structural energy (Sontag, 2003). This chapter seeks to bridge that gap by integrating film language analysis with the aesthetics of tragedy and the theory of the sublime, thereby repositioning the poetic function of fury within the cinematic image.

Liu Haibo and Zhang Zhenghui argue that Cao Baoping’s distinctive exploration of the three dimensions of “fury characters”, “fury actions”, and “fury audiovisuals” contributes to the formation of a unique “fury aesthetics” in Chinese cinema (Liu and Zhang 2024, 89–92). In “The Troublemakers”, this aesthetic is realized through concrete cinematographic strategies that visually and aurally embody the emotion of fury. Cao employs handheld camera movements and rapid editing to heighten the sense of agitation and instability during scenes of confrontation between the villagers and corrupt officials. The fluctuating rhythm of the shots mirrors the villagers’ escalating anger, allowing the audience to feel the tension viscerally. For instance, in the sequence where the villagers gather to protest at the local office, the tight framing and shaky camera create a suffocating sense of collective fury, transforming emotional unrest into a visual texture.

Lighting and color are also crucial in representing rage. The contrast between the dim interiors—symbolizing the oppression of power—and the bright, overexposed outdoor scenes—marking moments of resistance—visually dramatizes the villagers’ struggle. The use of harsh backlighting during Ye’s confrontation with the Xiong brothers highlights his moral courage, while the close-up shots of his trembling face and clenched fists externalize his inner fury. Similarly, the recurring sound of metal clanging and the crescendo of chaotic diegetic noise in scenes of conflict act as sonic amplifications of anger, blurring the boundary between diegetic and emotional soundscapes.

By constructing a small village full of contradictions and conflicts, “Troublemakers” exposes the dark side of grassroots corruption and moral decay. The four Xiong brothers embody the failures of power and bureaucracy, their actions harming both villagers and the broader ideals of justice. Cao’s visual strategies—such as long takes showing the villagers’ silent endurance before eruption—render fury not as an impulsive reaction, but as a moral awakening. This transformation of rage into ethical energy invites viewers to reflect on their own social realities and sense of justice.

In this sense, Cao turns fury into both a narrative and aesthetic force. The emotion of rage transcends personal grievance to become a structural principle of cinematic form—visible in the dynamic camera language, rhythmic editing, and contrasting sound design. The film’s cinematographic presentation of fury—its buildup, eruption, and aftermath—repositions anger

as a poetic expression of resistance and collective identity. By guiding the audience through this visual and emotional fluctuation, the film not only stimulates moral reflection but also renews the aesthetic experience of contemporary Chinese realist cinema.

Interdisciplinary research on the theme of rage, especially at the intersection of philosophy, psychology, and film aesthetics, provides us with a comprehensive and in-depth perspective to understand this complex human emotion. Taking film *The Troublemakers* as an example, we can explore each of these three disciplinary perspectives.

The philosophical examination of anger often grapples with its relationship to justice and social order. In the film, the villagers' fury towards the tyrannical Xiong brothers stems directly from a visceral reaction to profound injustice and the violation of communal dignity. Through the character of Ye, the film explores how such collective anger can propel action aimed at restoring balance, while also revealing how these actions can become entangled in complex power dynamics. This narrative sparks a deeper reflection on the intricate, and often problematic, relationship between fury, justice, and power.

Psychology provides a more nuanced analytical framework for understanding rage. Emotion regulation theory suggests that the generation and expression of fury is influenced by individual perceptions, appraisals and coping strategies. The villagers' fury towards the Xiong brothers is a direct response to their perceived violation of their rights. At the same time, the film also shows how fury affects individuals' decisions and behaviors, such as Ye's rage-driven plan to "capture power". Furthermore, the film shows the complexity of rage, such as Ye's inner struggle and decision-making during his actions, which reflects the interaction between fury and individual cognition and moral judgement.

From the perspective of film aesthetics, "*Troublemakers*" demonstrates its aesthetic value of fury as a theme through the unique narrative aesthetic¹⁸ and audiovisual language. Through its compact plots, vivid characterization, and tension-rich scene design, the film brings the audience into a world full of fury and struggle. By skillfully using camera language, such as close-ups and rapid editing, Cao strengthens the effect of the expression of rage. In parallel, the film provides a profound artistic processing of fury with dark humor and satirical elements, enabling the audience to experience the power and complexity of fury amidst laughter and tears. This not only enhances the film's viewability but also increases the depth of thought and artistic value aesthetically.

¹⁸ The primary point of the original article is to discuss Cao's insistence on the aesthetics of 'strong narrative' in his other film, *Dead End*. By 'strong narrative', he means that the narrative theme breaks through the inertia of separating good and evil in the expression of human nature; the narrative structure subverts the dichotomy of the structural model; and at the level of narrative strategy, it is perfectly combined with technical means. In this paper, the author borrows his comments to explain the impact of the 'aesthetics of rage' on film audiences.

3.2 The tragic aesthetics of rage

3.2.1 The Philosophical and Aesthetic Traces of Rage

As a fundamental human emotion, rage has long occupied a significant place in philosophical and aesthetic thought. From Aristotle's conception of catharsis¹⁹ in tragic art to Nietzsche's vision of the Dionysian²⁰ spirit, philosophical reflections on rage reveal the evolving relationship between emotion, morality, and artistic creation. These two traditions—classical rationalism and modern existentialism—together form the aesthetic and ethical foundations for understanding rage not merely as destructive passion, but as a generative force of renewal and transformation.

The Aristotelian notion that tragedy works through the orchestration of powerful emotions toward a form of clarification or release (catharsis)²¹ (Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449b 24-28) provides a valuable lens for analyzing the function of rage in film. If, as Aristotle suggested, pity and fear can be transformed through dramatic structure into a catalyst for psychological equilibrium, then artistically mediated rage may likewise serve not to merely depict chaos, but to probe and potentially reconfigure the moral order it transgresses.

In contrast to the Aristotelian framework, Nietzsche's concept of the Dionysian²²—articulated in his early work *The Birth of Tragedy*²³—celebrates the ecstatic, irrational, and life-affirming dimensions of human passion (Nietzsche, BT, §1). The Dionysian state denotes a moment of intoxication and dissolution wherein the principium individuationis collapses, allowing the individual to merge with the primordial, creative-destructive force of existence itself (BT, §1, §2). Rather than advocating the moral suppression of primal drives such as rage, Nietzsche's framework treats these intensities as transformative, world-affirming energies—a “Yes-saying” to life through its very suffering, chaos, and excess (cf. BT *Attempt at a Self-Criticism*, §4). Thus, rage is reconfigured from a merely personal affect into a potential means of transcending the individual self and reconnecting with the dynamic totality of being.

Taken together, Aristotle's catharsis and Nietzsche's Dionysian outline two complementary aesthetics of rage: one rational and purgative, the other ecstatic and generative. These theoretical perspectives provide a framework for examining how contemporary cinema translates emotional extremity into visual and narrative expression. In Cao Baoping's

¹⁹ There are three main interpretations of the term: first, purification or purgation of the emotions (such as pity and fear) primarily through art. Second, a purification or purgation that brings about spiritual renewal or release from tension. Third, elimination of a complex by bringing it to consciousness and affording it expression. Although there are differences in the specific words used, in general they are expressions of human emotional states.

²⁰ In this context, the Dionysian spirit refers primarily to that irrational, primitive, impulsive revelry to vent the fury emotions.

²¹ Aristotle. *Poetics*. Translated by Stephen Halliwell. Loeb Classical Library 199. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.

²² Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1967. (See especially sections 1, 2, and the “Attempt at a Self-Criticism”).

²³ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1967.

“Troublemakers”, the aesthetic of fury oscillates between these two poles—moral purification and Dionysian eruption—both of which converge vividly in the scene illustrated in Figure 3.2.1.

At approximately 00:55:36, Ye organizes the “Catch the Bear Project”, an act driven by his compassion for the villagers and his unbearable frustration with the pervasive corruption of the Xiong brothers. Although motivated by a sense of justice, Ye’s decision is also marked by fear and self-doubt—he fabricates the claim that the operation was ordered by higher authorities to secure the villagers’ trust. This moral compromise burdens him with anxiety and the fear of eventual betrayal. When Xiong’s thugs mistakenly intrude upon the villagers’ meeting, collective panic ensues, and suspicion fractures their fragile unity. The atmosphere becomes charged with tension, fear, and anger, reaching a moment of emotional climax.

At this critical juncture, Ye is briefly removed from the operation site by Xiong Laosan, intensifying the villagers’ crisis of faith and deepening the film’s portrayal of communal rage. When Ye finally returns and passionately declares that “the action has officially begun”, the camera captures his distorted face from an elevated angle, with the crowd submerged in shadows behind him (Figure 3.2.1). The interplay of light and shadow accentuates Ye’s conflicting emotions—excitement, unease, fear, and fury—transforming his outburst into a visual embodiment of Nietzsche’s Dionysian ecstasy. The complementary lighting amplifies his inner turmoil, while the composition suggests the tragic paradox Nietzsche described: “The individual is one with the cosmic life-being in destruction” (Nietzsche, 1872). In this moment, fury ceases to be a morally condemned emotion and becomes a revolutionary force that breaks through the existing power stalemate, aligning human suffering with an aesthetic of transcendence.



Figure 3.2.1

In the night scene where Ye gathers the villagers to conspire against the Xiong family, the director uses an overhead shot to film the crowd: the picture (Figure 3.2.2) is filled with both impassioned and fearful people, who shout along with Ye in an attempt to boost their morale and encourage themselves, while at the same time filling the frame with great panic. As they leave the room (Figure 3.2.3) and enter the dark alleyway, the villagers' faces are split into light

and dark fragments by the cold light of the lamps. When Ye shouts, “We'll do it tonight”, the camera suddenly switches to a close-up hand-held shot (Figure 3.2.4), and the villagers' breathing is amplified to create a collective wave of rage. This scene echoes the purification mechanism of "fear and pity" in Aristotle's theory of Catharsis: the audiences simultaneously fear the consequences of violent resistance and sympathize with the villagers' long-standing oppression, and ultimately gain catharsis through the hypothetical victory of the destruction of the Xiong family.



Figure 3.2.2



Figure3.2.3

In the scene where Gouluan leads the team to trap the elder brother of the Xiong family, he and the villagers tie up the elder brother of the Xiong family with ropes and throw him to the ground, Gouluan as the team leader puts the cash into his own pockets, everyone else quickly occupies the mahjong table, and develops a momentary glee and possession of the mahjong tiles on the table, desiring to have a reckless game. At this moment, Gouluan carries a pot full of ribs into the scene, the villagers overturn the tablecloth along with the mahjong tiles, and Gouluan puts the ribs right in the middle of the table, and all of them start to enjoy the food indulgently. Xiong Laoda, curled up on the ground, is covered by the rebels who are having a full meal, his red shirt is only slightly exposed through the gaps in the crowds, thus forming a kind of Dionysian orgy-like spectacle in this scene, like the Figure 3.2.5 shows bellow. Nietzsche pointed out in *The Birth of Tragedy* that the Dionysian spirit achieves integration with the cosmic essence through individual destruction. Here, what the rebels occupy is not only the physical space, and what they destroy is not only the individual Xiong Laoda, it is also the symbolic transformation of the power structure - the original violator is overthrown, and those who were once oppressed are replaced with violence, it is not yet known whether such a change of power is a healthy reform or not.



Figure3.2.4



Figure3.2.5

Tragic structure

The spatial setting of the film itself functions as a metaphor for tragedy. Heijingcun is a small, isolated mountain village with limited connection to the outside world. As shown in Figure 3.2.6 and Figure 3.2.7, the village is small in scale and its facilities are severely outdated—appearing as a place forgotten by social progress. This state of “oblivion” is not natural but imposed by human domination, specifically through the ruthless control of the four Xiong brothers. The enclosed spatial structure evokes the image of an ancient Greek theatre: the Xiong brothers occupy the village committee building—the symbolic center of power—while Ye Guangrong and the villagers remain confined to the peripheral alleys.

When Ye is summoned to meet the village chief midway through the operation, he pauses before the towering gatehouse of the village council, enveloped in darkness. His hunched shoulders and hesitant stance express inner fear and doubt, which the cold blue hue further externalizes (Figure 3.2.8). The gatehouse, as a symbol of power, visually overwhelms him even in the absence of the Xiong brothers.



Figure3.2.6



Figure3.2.7



Figure3.2.8

Cao Baoping reinforces this power hierarchy through spatial depth and movement. In the classic scene where Xiong Laosan assaults the villagers, the aggressor occupies the illuminated

foreground while the victims are forced into the shadowed corners of the frame—separated by iron fences, obscured by shrubs, or even driven into freezing water. This visual dichotomy vividly enacts Hegel’s “master–slave dialectic” (Hegel 2018,108): domination and submission are expressed through the control of space.

When the villagers’ rage culminates in their collective assault on the Xiong residence, the crowd gradually advances across the screen, reclaiming space through rapid cuts. Yet this effort collapses under the brothers’ counterattack, exposing the futility of resistance and the persistence of systemic oppression. This unfinished revolution embodies the tragic paradox of sublimity and failure—the will to resist confronting its inevitable defeat.

A similar spatial metaphor recurs in the sequence where Xiong Laosan chases and beats the villager Shui Gen. The two-minute long take follows the aggressor, always positioned on the right side of the frame, while the victim is compressed into the left corner. The repeated closure of the iron gate at the end of the alley forms a visual loop, symbolizing the inescapable cycle of domination. Here again, physical space materializes the impasse of Hegel’s dialectic: oppression is entrenched within structure, and rebellion can rupture but never fully reconstruct the order.

3.2.2 The "nobility" and "destructiveness" dialectic of Fury

Kant, in his *Critique of Judgement*²⁴, noted that the sense of the sublime arises from the subject’s simultaneous experience of fear and transcendence when confronted with a force beyond human control. This philosophical insight provides a profound basis for understanding the aesthetic nature of fury in “Troublemakers”. In the film, the villagers’ initial terror in the face of the Xiong brothers’ tyranny is not merely a response to external violence but also a reflection of their despair over the seeming impossibility of justice. Yet it is precisely this fear that ignites their rage, pushing them to transcend their weakness and confront the oppressive forces that dominate their lives. In this transformation—from fear to defiance, from paralysis to action—the villagers embody what Kant describes as the experience of the sublime: an elevation of the spirit through the confrontation with overwhelming power.

Furthermore, Kant conceives of the sublime as a triumph of rationality over emotional subjugation. The villagers’ eventual uprising, born from collective determination and moral reasoning, illustrates this triumph vividly. Their fury is not a blind eruption of violence but an assertion of human dignity and moral clarity in the face of force majeure. Thus, fury in *The Troublemakers* is rendered sublime precisely because it reconciles fear with reason, showing how moral courage can emerge from emotional extremity. In this sense, Kant’s theory does not

²⁴ In this article, it is based on the version which is translated by Werner s. Pluhar, with a Foreword by Mary J. Gregor, and published in 1987.

merely explain the villagers' emotional journey but also elevates it to a philosophical reflection on human resilience and the rational power of justice.

At the same time, Jacques Rancière's discussion of the "distribution of sensibility"²⁵ introduces a contrasting yet complementary perspective. Rancière argues that fury disrupts the existing order of perception and feeling, yet often fails to establish a new political subjectivity. This observation offers a valuable lens for interpreting the destructive side of fury in *The Troublemakers*. The villagers' collective anger temporarily overturns the established social and sensory order—the dominance of the Xiong brothers and the villagers' habitual submission. However, their revolt, while cathartic, remains confined to physical confrontation and emotional outburst. It destabilizes the visible order of oppression without generating a sustainable vision for renewal. The absence of clear political consciousness or long-term strategy leaves their fury suspended between liberation and chaos.

Combining Kant's concept of the sublime with Rancière's theory of sensibility reveals a dialectical relationship between transcendence and destruction within the film's portrayal of fury. On one hand, fury manifests as a sublime impulse—the villagers' courageous pursuit of justice and moral awakening. On the other, it exposes its destructive potential, leading to fragmentation and uncertainty. This interdependence demonstrates that fury in "The Troublemakers" is neither purely emancipatory nor wholly destructive; rather, it oscillates between the two, embodying the tragic complexity of human emotion and social struggle. Ultimately, both Kant and Rancière remind us of the need to balance rationality and sensibility when confronting rage. The villagers' collective action achieves a form of moral victory through unity and reason, yet their failure to construct a new political subjectivity exposes the limits of passion alone. This dialectical balance not only defines the aesthetic of fury in the film but also offers the audience a philosophical reflection on how to face rage, power, and justice in real life.

3.3 Localization of Violent aesthetics

Having established how "Troublemakers" constructs its narrative through the interplay of character dynamics, grassroots power struggles, and the cinematic rhythm of fury, attention can now shift to the film's distinctive treatment of violence. Violence in this context is not merely a narrative device or an expression of emotional intensity; it functions as a key element of the film's localized aesthetic strategy. By embedding brutality within specific social, cultural, and geographical frameworks, the film transforms violent spectacle into a medium for social critique and ethical reflection. This localized approach to violent aesthetics situates Cao's work within a broader genealogical trajectory, tracing the evolution of cinematic violence from the formalized, highly stylized spectacle of Hong Kong cinema to the socially engaged, introspective violence characteristic of contemporary mainland Chinese filmmaking. Such a perspective allows for a comparative exploration of how the aesthetic, symbolic, and narrative

²⁵ This term comes from Runcie Ender's book *The Politics of Aesthetics*.

functions of violence have been reconfigured to reflect both regional specificity and broader socio-political realities.

3.3.1 The Genealogy of Violent Aesthetics: From John Woo to Cao Baoping

The aesthetics of violence in Chinese cinema has undergone a shift from formal spectacle to realistic critique. In “A Better Tomorrow” 喋血双雄 (1986), Hong Kong director John Woo pioneered the paradigm of the “violence dance”: the slow-motion gunfight between Chow Yun-Fat with two guns, and the visual confrontation between church pigeons and splatters of blood, sublimated violence into a Romantic ritual. Through highly stylized camera movements (e.g. 360-degree surround shots) and symbolic metaphors (e.g. religious imagery), this aesthetic detaches violence from realistic logic and turns it into a purely audio-visual consumer object. In *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*, David Bordwell provides a deep insight into the aesthetics of violence in Hong Kong cinema. He argues that Hong Kong action films are not ashamed to borrow the oldest entertainment formula, loaded with chase scenes, death-defying sequences, and close calls, all of which together form the unique violence aesthetic of Hong Kong cinema. Rather than just blood and gore, the violent scenes in *The Troublemakers* incorporate more drama and dark humor. This makes the violence aesthetics in it more introspective and subtle. While the violent aesthetics in Hong Kong films often pursue visual impact and formal beauty, Cao focuses more on revealing social realities and human weaknesses through violent scenes.



Figure3.3.1



Figure3.3.2

For example, in the long shot of the alleyway where Xiong Laosan chases and beats up the villager Shui Gen: the camera is always following the violence from a distance of 1.5 meters, and the sounds of Xiong Laosan's punches and Shui Gen's moans are not reverberated, but directly impact the eardrums. When Shui Gen is cowering in the corner, the camera suddenly switches to his subjective point of view: Xiong Laosan's shoes take up two-thirds of the screen, and the mud on his shoe soles shakes off as he kicks and punches, symbolizing the power that crushes the flesh of the underclass. This kind of documentary violence contrasts sharply with John Woo's "Violence Dance", whose aesthetic is centered on forcing the audience to face the structural oppression behind the violence through an audio-visual realism approach. Another scene is when Gouluan is leading a team to control Boss Bear, the original plan was to guard the outside of the mansion and cut off eldest brother Xiong's contact with the other brothers. However, Gouluan is a man who can't stand dog meat. Once he smells dog meat, he will lose his mind and be determined to get his hands on the meat. When they are guarding outside as they should, the aroma of dog meat cooking in the kitchen of Big Brother Xiong's house comes out, which happens to be smelled by Dog Gouluan. The director uses high-speed photography and rapid editing to show the detail of Gouluan smelling the meat: the camera quickly pushes closer to the steaming pot from a distant view to a close-up, superimposing this section with the image of Gouluan sniffing outside the wall with his eyes closed, completely immersed by the meat smell (Figure 3.3.1), and finally fixing it on the steaming pot (Figure 3.3.2). This kind of temporal aberration does not show the slightest picture of violence, but it is the smell that causes Gouluan to lose his mind and completely throw away Ye's instruction, insisting on breaking into Brother Xiong's house, which in turn triggers the violent behavior that follows. This is a kind of inner-violence-- the compromise and violent resistance triggered by the loss of self-control can only break the order for a short time, but can't eradicate the genes of oppression. This kind of 'criticism in compromise' is the unique survival strategy of Chinese realism's violent aesthetics.

3.3.2 The Shaping of Violent Symbols

The first thing that needs to be noted is the power topology of physical violence present in the film. In the scene where Gouluan comes to Xiong's house to relieve his anger over his dismissal and instead encounters a beatdown from Xiong's brother, the film subtly reveals the symbiotic relationship between violence and power through the occupation of space. The interior of the Xiong family's house is open and spacious despite its cramped and gloomy tones, and the furnishings inside reinforce the owner's power. A brand new star-shaped cushion sits on the solid wood Taishi Chair (太师椅) (Figure 3.3.4)²⁶ in the middle of the hall, a blue and white style brush holder is placed symmetrically on both sides of the tall solid wood desk behind it, calligraphy hangs on the wall by the right side, and in front of it rests a striking box of Walmart merchandise, which jumps out very clearly from the dark tone of the background. The presence of goods from a foreign supermarket chain in a closed mountain village like Heijiangcun is proof that the Xiong family's economic foundation and social connections are above the entire village. On top of that, the presence of several thugs reinforces the majesty and power of the Xiong family. Although Gouluan, who enters the house, is aggressive and speaks roughly, he looks so weak and helpless in the overhead shot, and Xiong Laosan, who looks friendly and weak, looks down on him through the camera all the time; these two opposing camera positions expose the real strength and weakness of the relationship between them. As soon as Gouluan enters the door of the hall, he is pressed to the ground and his head is immersed in a washing basin without being able to move. Since then, the party in question, Xiong Laosan, does not need to step in, and all the violent deterrence is done by his elder brother. The brother beats Gouluan with impunity, even squatting over his head and letting out a loud fart on it. In the presentation of the film, Gouluan is always at the corners, and his angry facial close-ups are made even more impotent by Xiong's feet or legs in the foreground (Figure 3.3.3). Such spatial occupation brings out the power relationship between the two clearly. Violence is often used as a means of asserting power in the film. Xiong's elder brother assaults Gouluan not only as a punishment for his resistance but also as an assertion of power. Through this violence, the Xiong family sends a clear signal to the outside that those who challenge their power will be severely punished. At the same time, power also tends to condone and use violence to consolidate, and expand its status. Under Xiong's power, violence may be condoned and supported to a certain extent. This condoning does exacerbate social injustice and disorder, it also creates a symbiotic relationship between power and violence.

²⁶ The Taishi chair is the only chair in Chinese furniture that is named after an administrative position and was originally an officer's chair, a symbol of power and status. It was first used in the Song Dynasty, the initial form is a chair similar to the chair. Taishi chair can best reflect the styling characteristics of Qing Dynasty furniture, with a wide body, backrest, and armrests connected to form three, five, or more fans around the screen.



Figure 3.3.3

Apart from physical violence, there is also plenty of verbal violence in the film. The sequence in which Xiong Laoshi humiliates Dawang's wife in public demonstrates the symbolic violence of vernacular swearing. The director employs the sound and picture discrete technique: the content of the insults –“Your wife is the public toilet for the whole villageis”²⁷ presented in a voice-over, while the picture focuses on the close-ups of villagers on the sidelines - some sniggering with their heads bowed down, some swallowing their saliva, and some trembling with trembling fingers. This transformation of verbal violence into collective psychological oppression echoes Foucault's statement in *The Society of Punishment* that the capillaries of power have infiltrated every corner of the village, and this scene vividly demonstrates the micro-political environment of Heijingcun through verbal violence. Further, the whole film miniaturizes the political situation that exists in some parts of China.

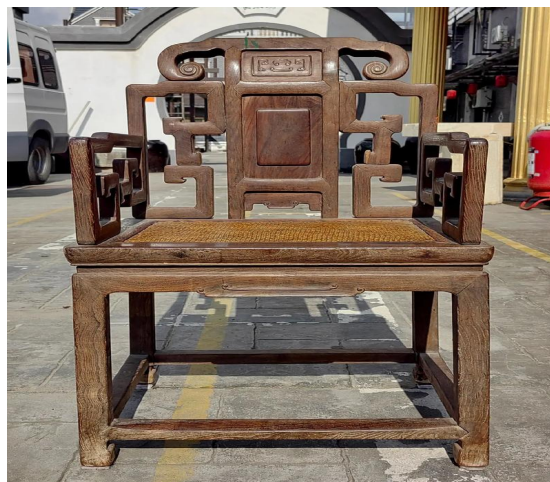


Figure 3.3.4 Taishi Chair

²⁷ This expression means “your wife is the whore for the whole village” in the Yunnan language. It is a very strong insult. “Public toilet” in this context means the things that everybody can use for free.

In conversations among the villagers, they often use violent expressions in the local language, such as "Han Zazhong" (憨杂种)²⁸ and "Gouri De" (狗日的)²⁹, which are used to express their fury and dissatisfaction with the behavior of the four Xiong brothers and their henchmen. Even the name "Gouluan" is highly insulting, it means "dog ball". When Gouluan became the chief commander of the action group to besiege Xiong Laoer, everyone called him by his name "Gouluan", which made him very angry. He felt very humiliated and asked people to call him "Commander-in-Chief". He expressed his dissatisfaction in the following ways:

狗卵，狗卵，我现在是二路总指挥的嘛！

Gouluan, Gouluan, I am now the Chief Commander of the Second team!

In expressing this demand, his face is distorted to show his strong dissatisfaction, and his head and chest are high, which shows his high self-esteem and vanity. While expressing himself verbally, he slaps the head of the team member with one of his hands, thus the violence in the language is externalized through physical actions. This kind of verbal violence exists not only in the oppression of the Xiong brothers but also in the masses, with the same underlying cause: power generates and condones violence.

The use of expletives reflects the villagers' challenge and resistance to the power of the village chief. The villagers express their dissatisfaction and fury against the village chief's tyranny through swearing, and this verbal violence becomes a way for them to resist their power. At the same time, the village chief and his men respond to the villagers' challenge with profanity, reflecting the power struggle between the two parties. Secondly, it deepens the sense of identity and group belonging among the villagers. Villagers use the same language to communicate and express themselves, forming common values and codes of action. This sense of identity makes the villagers more united against the tyranny of the village head. The use of dialectal profanity challenges traditional Chinese social norms and morals. Although this challenge is motivated by anger against social injustice and dissatisfaction with the status quo, it does not change the status quo; on the contrary, the micro-political system reflected in this expression of linguistic violence is a playful critique of the macro-political system in China.



Figure 3.3.5



Figure 3.3.6

²⁸ It is often used as a curse word, where “憨” indicates stupidity or naivety, and “杂种” has a pejorative meaning of impurity or inferiority. Overall, the word ‘憨杂种’ is used to describe someone who is stupid and impure.

²⁹ It is usually a pejorative or vulgar colloquial expression used to describe someone's behaviour as upsetting or outrageous, or occasionally used as a joke between friends, but one needs to pay careful attention to the occasion and the person to whom it is used in order to avoid offending others.

There are many scenes in the film where silent violence is used to achieve a kind of psychological shock, and "silent violence" is used to reach the ultimate oppression, this kind of shock does not only work on the characters in the film but also on the audience. In the scene where Xiong Laosan interviews Ye Guangrong in the middle of the night and confesses to him that his brother has captured two women from outside the village (50m58s), the panoramic shot of Xiong lighting a cigarette with his head bowed and Ye sitting next to him in panic, Xiong does not say a word except concentrating on lighting the cigarette, flicking the ash, smoking, and the camera switches several times to show Ye's doubt and anxiety from multiple angles (Figure 3.3.5). In contrast, Xiong has been sitting stoically in his chair, with a dominant, oppressive feeling. After 18 seconds of silence, Xiong finally breaks the ice by opening the door to explain that he has two women in his house who were abducted by his brother. Immediately afterward they fall into a brief silence again, Ye is unprepared for his opponent's "straight-ball attack"³⁰ and is momentarily at a loss for how to respond, and after seeing his caught off-guard dilemma Xiong takes the opportunity to press him for his opinion, not giving him any time to think. This aesthetics of "to stop with silence", echoes Bazan's pursuit of the "asymptote of reality" (André Bazin 2008, 76-79)- the essence of violence is not in the amplitude of action but in the cumulative effect of psychological deterrence. It is worth noting that before the dialogue between the two men begins, there is a close-up shot of an ashtray (Figure 3.3.6) with a lot of cigarette butts in it, which clearly shows that Xiong's confesses and honesty at this point decision made after much deliberation. Ostensibly he is asking Ye for help, but it is a disguised form of shock and intimidation; it is a deeper form of psychological violence.

3.3.3 Revised Version: "De-romanticized" Violence and the Reception Aesthetics of "Troublemakers"

The aesthetic design of "The Troublemakers" constructs a reception framework that guides viewers to perceive violence not as spectacle or heroism, but as an embodied, unsettling experience. Rather than appealing to the audience's emotional identification in a romanticized way, the film employs a set of visual and auditory strategies that mediate distance and reflection. Within this framework, empathy, detachment, and compromise become key aesthetic orientations through which the film negotiates the spectators' perception of violence.

In the first instance, what might be called the aesthetic of empathy is achieved through the visual language of realist cinematography. In the scene where Ye unexpectedly encounters Xiong Laosan in town, the hand-held camera follows his nervous movement as he pushes his bicycle, greeting passers-by in an almost ingratiating manner. When Ye notices Xiong Laosan socializing with the county secretary, his body stiffens and he pretends to fix his bicycle in a clumsy attempt to hide. The close-up of his sweating face, the flushed cheeks, and the unfocused eyes—all set against a defocused background—construct a visual field of tension.

³⁰ It refers to when a person unexpectedly and directly states his or her attitude towards something or asks a question, without any hints or explanations prior to that.

This juxtaposition of “focusing and defocusing” invites the viewer not to consume violence as spectacle but to sense its psychological oppression through Ye’s bodily reaction. The intention is not to evoke direct emotional sympathy but to create a mediated identification, enabling the audience to experience the oppressive atmosphere of fear that precedes violence.

If the visual field cultivates empathetic proximity, the film’s sound design generates an opposite movement—a detachment effect that encourages critical distance. Through minimalist and strategically disruptive use of sound, the film undermines emotional immersion. For instance, in the nocturnal scene where Xiong Laosan confesses that his brother has abducted two women, the sudden ringing of a cuckoo-clock breaks the stillness just as Ye is about to leave. The abrupt sound coincides with Xiong’s call of Ye’s name, heightening unease through acoustic tension. Rather than amplifying emotional intensity, this interruption estranges both characters and viewers, momentarily pulling them out of the narrative flow. Within the reception aesthetics of the film, this design functions as a reflexive cue—it prevents the audience from romanticizing violence, urging them instead to reflect on the moral implications of passivity and complicity. Similarly, the use of dialect and ironic dialogue further reinforces the sense of alienation. The villagers’ mockery of the Xiong brothers as the “Gang of Four”³¹ infuses humor into a violent context, producing a tonal dissonance that prompts reflection rather than identification. Through irony, the film constructs a double-layered reception mode: the viewer laughs while simultaneously recognizing the social despair beneath the humor.

The aesthetics of compromise further shapes how the film mediates the relationship between violence and spectatorship. This aesthetic operates as an ideological coding that balances expressive authenticity with censorship constraints. As director Cao Baoping revealed, the original script envisioned the villagers’ spontaneous revolt as the climax, but the censors required the intervention of “institutional justice.”³² In the final version, the police descend to subdue the Xiong family, yet the *mise-en-scène* subtly undermines their authority. The flickering beams of the police lights cast oppressive shadows over the villagers’ faces, while low-angle shots fragment the officer’s body, reducing him to an anonymous emblem of power. This visual coding, reminiscent of the “model opera” aesthetics (*Yangbanxi*)³³ of the Cultural Revolution, deliberately exaggerates the image of justice to the point of irony. By combining surface compliance with subversive imagery, the film turns censorship itself into an aesthetic strategy—a “compromised” form that both obeys and critiques authority. The interspersed

³¹ The term “Gang of Four” is used here to refer to the four Xiong brothers. This usage deliberately invokes the pejorative connotation of the historical “Gang of Four” from Chinese political history, suggesting their similarly detrimental influence within the rural power structure.

³² The interview was originally published in *Southern Weekend* (南方周末) by Zhang Ying and Li Yilan, but the documentation used in the project was transferred from the Douban film blogger ‘shiyiyue’de yu’ (十一月的雨). <https://movie.douban.com/review/13970620/>

³³ *Yangbanxi* is a particular kind of artwork that appeared during the Cultural Revolution in China, including different art forms such as Peking Opera, ballet, film, opera, etc. They are ideologically required to glorify the Communist Party of China. Ideologically, they must glorify the Communist Party of China (CPC), the good guys must be handsome and tall, and they are mostly shot from an elevated angle, with a lot of fill-in light at the front, to achieve a kind of apotheosis effect.

depictions of daily life amidst violence further perform this compromise, softening the brutality of the scenes while allowing space for reflection.

Taken together, these strategies demonstrate that “Troublemakers” constructs not a psychological mechanism of the audience but an aesthetic mode of reception. Through empathy, detachment, and compromise, the film orchestrates a complex interplay between emotional engagement and critical distance, leading viewers to confront violence as a moral and aesthetic problem rather than a romanticized spectacle. In doing so, it extends the tradition of Chinese realist cinema, transforming censorship, irony, and fear into components of a de-romanticized cinematic ethics.

3.4 Rhetoric of Light and Shadow: Visualizing Narratives of Fury

Fury, as a strong emotion, the expression on screen often relies on multi-dimensional image elements such as color, tone, camera shooting angle and editing rhythm. “The Troublemakers” is a film that profoundly reveals social conflicts and human struggles, and presents the complex emotion of fury to the audience in a visual way through a unique rhetoric of light and shadow. This subsection will provide an analysis about the rhetoric of light and shadow in the film, combining film theory and aesthetic theory.

3.4.1 Symbolic System of Color and Tone

Louis Giannetti analyzes the significance of color in film in *Understanding Film* as follows,

Color tends to be a subconscious element in the film. It's strongly emotional in its appeal, expressive and atmospheric rather than intellectual. Psychologists have discovered that most people actively attempt to interpret the lines of a composition, but they tend to accept color passively, permitting it to suggest moods rather than objects.....

Black-and-white photography in a color film is sometimes used for symbolic purposes. Some filmmakers alternate whole episodes in black and white with entire sequences in color. The problem with this technique is its corny symbolism. The jolting black-and-white sequences are too obviously “significant” in the most arty sense.

From the above discussion, we can realize that the narrative or symbolic meaning assumed by color in film creation is so important. And the use of black and white seems to have a deeper symbolic meaning in modern filmmaking as well.

In Chinese culture, according to the Five Directions (五方)³⁴ and the Five Elements(五行)³⁵, the space of the sky and the ground is divided into five directions: east, west, north, south, and center, which belong to the five elements of gold, wood, water, fire, and earth, and these five elements correspond to the Five Colors (五色)³⁶ of Cyan, ruddy, white, black and yellow. Therefore, we can see that the north corresponds to the water element, black, so people often associate black with "deep". In addition, black is often used to symbolize "mysterious and solemn" because of its proximity to the night color. In Chinese culture, black has a double meaning. On the one hand, since it is similar to the color iron, during ancient times, black was often used to mean "uprightness, selflessness, and perseverance". For example, in the art of Peking opera face painting, black is often used to portray the image of an iron-faced, selfless, fair, and honest character, typically represented by Bao Zheng(包拯)³⁷. On the other hand,

³⁴ The Five Directions theory refers to an ancient Chinese system of spatial orientation—East, South, West, North, and Center—which also forms a core component of the Five Elements (五行) framework. Beyond its geographic sense, it carries profound cosmological and philosophical meanings, reflecting early Chinese understandings of the generation, transformation, and harmony of all things in nature, as well as the ideal balance between humanity and the cosmos. The concept appears in classical texts such as the *Book of Documents* (《尚书》, Shangshu), *Zhouli* (《周礼》, *Rites of Zhou*), and *Huainanzi* (《淮南子》). For English-language discussions, see John S. Major et al., *The Huainanzi: A Guide to the Theory of the Five Elements* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), and James Legge, trans., *The Chinese Classics, Volume III: The Shoo King* (Shangshu) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879).

³⁵ The *Five Elements* (五行) theory is a systematic generalization of the fundamental attributes of five substances—wood, fire, earth, metal, and water—and explains their interrelations through the processes of generation (相生), restraint (相克), and transformation (变化). These elements constitute the essential structure of the universe, whose cyclical interactions govern both natural phenomena and human affairs. The earliest records of the theory appear in *The Book of Documents* (“Hongfan”), later developed in *Lüshi Chunqiu* (《吕氏春秋》) and *Huainanzi* (《淮南子》). For detailed studies, see John S. Major et al., *The Huainanzi: A Guide to the Theory of the Five Elements* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), and James Legge, trans., *The Chinese Classics, Volume III: The Shoo King* (Shangshu) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879).

³⁶ The Five Colors (五色) theory constitutes an essential extension of the Five Elements and Five Directions systems in Chinese cosmology. Each color embodies a particular symbolic meaning and corresponds to a specific natural element and seasonal cycle: cyan (青) signifies vitality and growth, linked to spring and wood; red (赤) symbolizes passion and brightness, linked to summer and fire; yellow (黄) represents stability and centrality, linked to earth; white (白) denotes purity and harvest, linked to autumn and metal; and black (黑) signifies depth and wisdom, linked to winter and water. These associations enriched ancient Chinese aesthetics, ritual symbolism, and artistic practice. The theory is elaborated in classical texts such as *Liji* (《礼记》, Book of Rites) and *Huainanzi* (《淮南子》). For English-language studies, see John S. Major et al., *The Huainanzi: A Guide to the Theory of the Five Elements* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), and Li Zehou, *The Path of Beauty: A Study of Chinese Aesthetics*, trans. Gong Lizeng (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1988).

³⁷ Bao Zheng (包拯), the famous judge of the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127 CE), is one of the most celebrated historical figures in Chinese culture, renowned for his incorruptibility and impartial administration of justice. In traditional Peking opera (京剧), Bao Zheng’s face is painted black to symbolize integrity, fearlessness, and fairness—qualities that earned him the epithet “the selfless man with an iron face” (铁面无私). His two sharply arched eyebrows express his constant concern for the welfare of the state and the people, reflecting his diligence and sleepless devotion to justice. The white crescent moon painted on his forehead represents purity and clarity, signifying his moral character “as bright as the moon.” According to popular legend, it also marks him as the “Yin-Yang Judge” (阴阳判官), a divine magistrate capable of investigating and punishing evildoers even in the afterlife. Thus, the Peking opera iconography of Bao Zheng not only visualizes his ethical virtues but also fuses Confucian morality, legal rigor, and folk cosmology into a single aesthetic image of justice. See Li Ruru, Sheng, Dan, Jing, Mo, Chou: *The Character Types of Traditional Chinese Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2020), 115–118; and Zhongguo Jingju Yishu Yanjiuyuan (中国京剧艺术研究院), *Jingju Shenghuadan Jingmochou* (京剧生旦净末丑) (Beijing: Zhongguo Xiju Chubanshe, 1991).

black is also used in a derogatory sense, such as the Chinese idiom of "reversing black and white" (颠倒黑白). Qu Yuan (屈原) wrote in "Nine Chapters - Huaisha" (《九章·怀沙》)³⁸, "Turning white into black, reversing up into down". (“变白以为黑兮，倒上以为下”)
In addition, black is also related to the ancient Chinese punishment of "branding", in the Zhou and Qin dynasties, people who made mistakes would be tattooed or engraved on their cheeks and then filled with black so that the prisoner's face would be permanently marked, making them very easy to be recognized. Over time, black color came to mean "dishonorable".



Figure 3.4.1 Trouble Makers



Figure 3.4.2 Trouble makers

The overall color tone in the film “Troublemakers” is a cold black tone, which can be perceived in Figure 3.4.1 and Figure 3.4.2. Since the basic atmosphere of the film is depressing, gray, and adventurous, black is the most appropriate color to express the main theme of the film. In this film, black is a negative color that produces a heavy, depressive, and gloomy mood in the nerves of the audience. Cao used a dark-cold tone to construct a troubled rural world, a grim village with a dark gray tint attached to it. At the same time, this obscure critique of social reality is cleverly concealed in such a black tone.

Black color carries a double meaning, therefore, in this film, black is used as the main color, which on the one hand expresses the theme of the film - the villagers of Heijingcun live in darkness, and the action against the bullies is very uncertain, if finally, the action is successful, it is still unsure whether the new ruler can change the current situation. However, there is a strong possibility that the new ruler will be the beginning of the next dark era for it. Whether the director intended to do so or it was just a coincidence, the use of black subconsciously matches the meaning of "black" in traditional Chinese culture. Furthermore, when the film was submitted to the censorship authorities, the filmmakers were able to use the idea of the duality of the meaning of black to argue for passing the censorship, which provided the director with some theoretical excuses to weaken the irony of the film, while ensuring that the moral of the film would be understood by the audience at the time of publication.

André Bazin’s seminal writings on cinematic realism foreground the depth of field as a crucial formal device, arguing that it preserves the spatiotemporal continuity of events and actively

³⁸ Qu Yuan (屈原), *Jiu Zhang: Huaisha* (《九章·怀沙》), one of the poems in the Nine Chapters (Jiu Zhang), traditionally dated to the late Warring States period. The poem is generally considered one of Qu Yuan’s final works, expressing his dissatisfaction with the political corruption of Chu, his southern journey, and his hope that his words might awaken the ruler and the people.

engages the spectator in constructing cinematic space³⁹ (Bazin 1967, 23-40). Extending this logic of spatial authenticity, the interplay of light and shadow within such a deep-focus composition can be seen to articulate the emotional and psychological texture of that space. In “Trouble Makers”, a pervasive cold blue palette, often mixed with gray, performs this function. It dominates the village council scenes and the night of the revolt, enveloping both interiors and streets. As the four groups move cautiously, their figures are swallowed by this blue, while shadows from hedges and trees carve sharp fractures across it, falling upon their faces and bodies. This visual strategy serves as a powerful metaphor for the psychological trauma inflicted by the Xiong brothers’ tyranny. The color choice reflects not only the tangible inequality within the village committee but also the internalized oppression of the villagers. The cold, heavy darkness of the blue-tinted scenes intensifies the audience’s visceral sense of entrenched power and suffocating repression.

The five colors are the most fundamental colors, which cannot be extracted or mixed from any other colors, and are therefore considered to be the purest and most supreme colors. On this basis, the "main colors" are mixed in order to produce five "mixed colors". Therefore, in ancient China, the five colors theory combined the objective nature of objects with the feudal system, so that colors were no longer just visual perception, but also a strong hierarchical concept system. For instance, main colors or mixed-colors could only be used by rulers and officials and nobles, particularly yellow could only be used by rulers, and civilian people could only use miscellaneous colors with low saturation, thus violating this rule would lead to serious disasters.

Red is a kind of mixed-color extended by the "Qi" 漆 color in the Chinese "Five Colors Theory", and the so-called mixed-color is a color produced by mixing two main colors. It is bright and high saturation, generally considered to be a symbol of "good luck and celebration", in addition to the saying that red is like blood, so red also means blood, violence, and danger, at the same time, red is like fire, it also interprets the passion and enthusiasm. Peking opera face painting in red is generally loyal, brave, and chivalrous people, mainly for the positive role, the color of this type of face painting represents the character of Guan Gong (关公)⁴⁰. Certain negative characters also hook to red as the main color of the face, which has an ironic

³⁹ Bazin, André. “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema.” In *What Is Cinema?* Vol. 1, translated by Hugh Gray, 23–40. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967.

⁴⁰ Guan Gong (关公), originally Guan Yu (关羽) and also known as Guan Yunchang (关云长), was a prominent general of the late Eastern Han Dynasty and a close ally of Liu Bei (刘备) alongside Zhang Fei (张飞). He played a key role in Liu Bei’s military campaigns and was later deified as the "God of War" in Chinese popular culture. According to historical records, he was eventually defeated by the combined forces of Wei and Wu, lost his son, and was killed. In Luo Guanzhong’s *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (三国演义), Guan Yu is idealized as loyal, benevolent, and martial, wielding the iconic Blue Dragon Crescent Blade. In Chinese folklore, he is also venerated as the "Lord of Grace" in Taiwan and worshipped in Southeast Asia, as well as among overseas Chinese communities in countries such as Japan, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, the United States, and the United Kingdom, often regarded as a deity associated with martial valor and wealth.

meaning. For example, Huang Chao (黄巢)⁴¹ of "Xiangmei Temple"(祥梅寺)⁴² is a rebellious rebel against the Tang dynasty, his red face is an iconic symbol of the Tang Emperor Xi Zong (唐僖宗). At the same time, green is a mixture of cyan and yellow, which corresponds to the "five elements" of wood, green is just like green plants full of vitality and vitality, so green is often seen as a symbol of harmony, it represents vitality and peace.



Figure 3.4.3 Peking opera mask
Guan Gong



Figure 3.4.4 Peking opera mask
Huang Chao

In the film “Troublemakers”, Xiong Lao San (Figure 3.4.5), as the leader of the four Xiong brothers, suppresses everyone in the entire village. Nearly all of his costumes are dominated by red elements, which is in line with his abundant energy, and the blood, violence, and danger he represents. Moreover, his red clothing looks more dazzling in the overall dark tone and also highlights the poignancy of the conflict. This character's costume is designed in red is the same as the red color used for Huang Chao's face in Peking Opera. The main character Ye (Figure 3.4.6) is also wearing red and green, red in his case is positive and courageous, and green is more inclined to Ye the character may bring new hope and vitality to Heijingcun. In addition, red and green are a pair of complementary colors, first of all, they are visually very conspicuous, then a strong contrast can sometimes be a well-symbolized contradiction, such as Ye and Xiong is a very distinctive set of contradictory relationship. The color they wear is exactly consistent with this. This intensive confrontation in colors is also an outward display of the fury of those who are deeply oppressed by the Bear brothers, represented by Ye, which is different from words but speaks much more than words.

⁴¹ Huang Chao (黄巢, 820–884) was a peasant rebel leader during the late Tang Dynasty and the founder of the short-lived Qi regime. His rebellion challenged the Tang central authority, briefly established the Qi government, and introduced reforms in administrative and military organization. Although the revolt ultimately contributed to widespread social disruption, clan and regional fragmentation, and prolonged conflict, it also undermined the entrenched feudal elite and hastened the decline of the Tang Dynasty.

⁴² “Xiangmei Temple” (祥梅寺) is a traditional Peking Opera piece adapted from the historical text *Tang Huiyao* (唐会要), which chronicles the Tang Dynasty's administrative history. The story centers on a monk named Liaokong (了空) from Xiangmei Temple, who encounters two ghosts stealing oil. They foretell the impending rebellion of Huang Chao and threaten him with a sacrificial knife. Upon Huang Chao's arrival at the temple, Liaokong approaches him and prays for mercy. Huang Chao spares his life but instructs him to hide when the uprising begins. As the rebellion unfolds, Liaokong conceals himself in a tree. Huang Chao, swearing an oath with his sword, searches for the monk and ultimately kills him by striking the tree.



Figure 3.4.5



Figure 3.4.6

3.4.2 Handheld Photography and Phenomenological Experience

The phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, particularly as developed in *Phenomenology of Perception*, posits the lived body as the primary site of being-in-the-world, emphasizing that perception and spatiality are fundamentally embodied experiences (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 140-141, 284-285). This theoretical framework illuminates how the hand-held cinematography in the fury scene operates beyond mere visual recording to directly engage the viewer's bodily sense. The shaky, unstable images produce a visceral, kinesthetic discomfort in the audience, resonating with the characters' own fury and disorientation. In the group conflict scenes, this technique amplifies the tension and chaos, making viewers feel thrust into the epicenter of the action. For example, during the search of Xiong Laosan's house, the hand-held camera adopts Ye's subjective perspective, chaotically scanning the environment, stumbling through the crowd, and finally collapsing to the ground with a disorienting view of shaking trees and sky. This intense kinetic visual style transmits the characters' inner turmoil directly to the audience's own sense of equilibrium and proprioception. This embodied engagement aligns with Christian Metz's concept of the "identification mechanism" developed in *The Imaginary Signifier* (Metz 1982, 48-52). Metz, synthesizing Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, argued that cinema compensates for the spectator's lack through identification with the cinematic apparatus and its figures. The visceral, first-person camera movement in this sequence acts as a powerful medium for such emotional contagion, bridging the gap between spectator and character by simulating a shared, embodied experience of chaotic motion and affective intensity.

Cao frequently employs close-up shots in this film to emphasize both the characters' emotional states and, at times, the ethical or artistic tendencies of the filmmaker. Stanislavski's *emotional memory theory* posits that actors should draw upon their own past emotional experiences to generate authentic and natural performances. Close-ups are particularly effective in capturing subtle facial expressions, including minute changes in the eyes, which can amplify the actor's emotional expression and provide the audience with a visceral sense of the character's inner turmoil. This technique directly aligns with Stanislavski's emphasis on emotional memory, as it allows the actor's recalled emotions to be externalized visually.

Freud's concept of the subconscious further illuminates this process. He argued that the subconscious contains primitive impulses, instinctive desires, and deeply rooted emotions that are not directly accessible to conscious awareness, yet profoundly shape behavior. In the context of film performance, these subconscious emotions can be subtly conveyed through the

actor's gestures, expressions, and micro-reactions, allowing the audience to intuitively perceive the character's inner emotional landscape.

For instance, in "Troublemakers", after Ye endures the malicious drunkenness imposed by the Xiong brothers and is left powerless, a close-up following a blackout (Figure 3.4.7) reveals his inner state: his forehead slightly nods, eyebrows furrow, face flushed, mouth holding the last mouthful of difficult-to-swallow wine, lips tightly pressed together, and eyes filled with both fury and helplessness. This close-up captures the actor's nuanced facial movements, externalizing the character's deeper, subconscious emotions. These expressions not only draw upon the actor's emotional memory but also transform these recollections into an embodied performance that resonates subconsciously with the audience. The furrowed brow and intense eyes convey fury and resistance rooted in the character's empathy for injustice and oppression.

Thus, there exists a dynamic interplay between close-ups, emotional memory, and subconscious emotion. Through emotional memory, actors recall and integrate past experiences into their roles; through skilled performance and cinematic techniques such as close-ups, these internalized emotions are projected outward, enabling the audience to perceive them intuitively. Freud's insights into subconscious emotional processes help explain how these visualizations allow viewers to experience the characters' inner psychological states, thereby deepening their understanding of both character and theme. In this way, the film demonstrates how close-ups serve as a bridge between the actor's emotional memory and the audience's subconscious reception, enhancing the expressive power of cinema.



Figure 3.4.7

3.4.3 Montage to Control the Rhythm of Fury

The analysis of narrative structure in dramatic works often finds a foundational reference point in Aristotle's *Poetics*, which examines the organization of plot, the logic of action, and the strategic elicitation of audience emotion. While interpretations of concepts like catharsis remain debated, principles concerning unified action, causal progression, and emotional modulation remain influential analytical tools. In the film "The Troublemakers", the

construction of the narrative—through the sequencing of scenes, the composition of shots, and the deployment of sound—appears to engage with such classical principles of dramatic composition. This is particularly evident in the careful modulation of the central emotional force: "fury." This study will, therefore, take "fury" as an analytical thread to investigate how the film's plot structure and scenic articulation shape the rhythm, intensification, and release of this core emotion.

Opening: Depression and Accumulation

The film begins with Gouluan visiting the Xiong household to seek justice and being beaten, a sequence depicted through a series of slow-paced, low-saturation shots that highlight the hardships and despair of the villagers in Heijing Village. Although this episode contains both action and emotional intensity, the camera positions the audience face-to-face with Gouluan as he navigates the narrow alleyways, shouting insults, his arms swinging forcefully, while the camera pans over dilapidated houses, muddy roads, and the villagers' weary expressions. This careful orchestration of visual elements reflects the Aristotelian principle of pathos, which emphasizes the gradual accumulation of emotion in the audience (Aristotle 1996, 33). The measured pacing of shots allows viewers sufficient time to apprehend the villagers' depression and helplessness, establishing an emotional baseline that prepares the audience for the subsequent eruption of "fury". The smooth transitions between shots maintain coherence and emotional stability, consistent with Aristotelian notions of narrative unity and logical progression (Aristotle 1996, 36).

Escalating Conflict: Tensions and Conflicts

As the narrative unfolds, the malicious actions of the four Xiong brothers gradually surface, and the villagers' discontent and fury intensify. Here, the director employs techniques aligned with Aristotelian dramatic principles to accelerate the narrative tempo and heighten tension. Rapid alternation between scenes depicting each brother—such as the eldest lecturing the villagers, the second manipulating accounts, the third exercising his authority as village chief, and the fourth engaging in hooliganism—visualizes their cumulative evil and amplifies dramatic tension. In accordance with Aristotle's concept of peripeteia, these contrasting portrayals of oppression create a turning point in the emotional rhythm, provoking audience empathy and anticipation (Aristotle 1996, 45). Simultaneously, the director employs contrastive editing to juxtapose the villagers' bowed heads and fearful expressions against the arrogance of the Xiong brothers, deepening the audience's perception of the villagers' helpless fury and reinforcing the ethical stakes of the conflict. This careful structuring exemplifies the Aristotelian emphasis on catharsis, as the audience gradually experiences the mounting injustice that drives the plot forward (Aristotle 1996, 36).

Outbreak and Climax: Fury and Revolt

Following Ye's covert investigation and the villagers' growing solidarity, the effort to apprehend the Xiong brothers commences, marking the narrative climax. At this stage, the

emotional intensity reaches its peak, and the villagers' fury is fully realized. The filmmaker conveys this through a combination of dynamic shot sequences that emphasize both the spatial and emotional stakes of the confrontation. Rapid intercutting captures the villagers acting in unison, tracking and confronting the Xiong brothers, which heightens the immediacy and tension of the scene. This aligns with Aristotle's principle of dramatic rhythm, in which plot events and their unfolding emotional consequences are carefully timed to maximize audience engagement (Aristotle 1996, 39). In addition, the filmmaker employs a technique akin to accumulative repetition: key moments are reinforced through repeated or similar shots, such as the villagers uniting against the Xiong brothers. This repetition intensifies the audience's perception of collective fury and contributes to the cathartic release that Aristotle identifies as central to dramatic climax, simultaneously advancing the narrative and amplifying the thematic resonance of revolt (Aristotle 1996, 36).

Ending: Release and Calm

At the film's conclusion, with the Xiong brothers brought to justice, the villagers' anger subsides, giving way to celebration and relief. The filmmaker reflects this emotional release through slow-paced, high-saturation shots depicting communal joy—villagers gathering, raising cups, laughing, and cheering. These visual choices effectively convey inner emotional satisfaction, consistent with Aristotelian ideas of resolution (*denouement*), where tension dissipates and balance is restored (Aristotle 1996, 42). Furthermore, the director employs contrasting sequences to highlight the transformation of the villagers' emotional state: the juxtaposition of prior oppression with present triumph accentuates the dramatic and ethical development of the characters. This deliberate structuring aligns with Aristotle's principle of unity of action, emphasizing the causal and emotional coherence of the narrative (Aristotle 1996, 37). Through these cinematic choices, the film not only provides the audience with a sense of cathartic relief but also deepens comprehension of the villagers' psychological growth, thereby reinforcing the thematic and moral framework central to Aristotelian drama (Aristotle 1996, 36–42).

Through the above analysis, it becomes evident that the filmmaker's control over the rhythm of fury is manifested in several interrelated strategies. One key approach is the regulation of shot length. Across different narrative stages of the film, the filmmaker adjusts the duration of each shot to shape the audience's emotional experience. In the opening sequences, prolonged shots create a sense of depression and gradual emotional accumulation, allowing viewers to immerse themselves in the villagers' hardships. Conversely, during the climax, the filmmaker accelerates the pace of the narrative through rapid cutting, which heightens tension and intensifies the emotional impact. This manipulation of shot length not only enables the audience to perceive the fluctuations of emotion more vividly but also strengthens the dramatic tension and aesthetic layering of the film (Eisenstein 1949, 35).

Another crucial technique lies in the deliberate editing and juxtaposition of images. The filmmaker heightens emotional expression by carefully contrasting shots that convey differing emotional states. For example, when depicting the villagers under the oppression of the Xiong

brothers, the sequence alternates between the villagers' silent and fearful faces and the brothers' arrogant demeanor. Similarly, in the celebratory scenes following the villagers' victory, the editing contrasts their prior experiences of helplessness with their present joy and tranquility. These visual comparisons allow the audience to perceive the transformation and growth of the characters' emotions, while also reinforcing the film's overall impact through compelling visual contrasts (Bazin 1967, 52).

Furthermore, the filmmaker employs techniques of cumulative montage and repeated editing to continuously enrich the emotional texture. In critical moments of action, fury is amplified through a succession of similar or identical shots, reinforcing the intensity of the villagers' anger. Likewise, in sequences celebrating the villagers' triumph, repeated editing emphasizes the emotion of joy and collective relief. By employing accumulation and repetition, the film enables the audience to experience emotional changes more profoundly, while simultaneously enhancing the rhythmic flow and ornamental quality of the narrative (Eisenstein 1949, 42).

Through its rich visual symbols and carefully orchestrated narrative strategies, *The Troublemakers* emerges as a profound visual expression of fury. By combining shadow, camera movement, and rhythmic control of editing, Cao ensures that the audience both "sees" and "feels" the fury. This perceptual experience is underpinned by the interplay of diverse cinematic and aesthetic theories, including Rudolf Arnheim's *Visual Psychology* (Arnheim 1954, 89), André Bazin's *Realist Aesthetics* (Bazin 1967, 46), and Eisenstein's *Montage Theory* (Eisenstein 1949, 28). Within this framework, fury functions not merely as an emotional release but also as a profound reflection on social reality and the human condition.

3.5 Breakthroughs and Limitations of Social Realist Aesthetics

The realist tradition adhered to by the Sixth Generation directors is evident in the intergenerational transformation of documentary aesthetics. Jia Zhangke pioneered "Ruin Realism" in *"Xiaowu"* (1998), capturing the marginal conditions of existence in transitional China through the coarse texture of DV photography and the improvisation of non-professional actors. In comparison, the breakthrough of *"The Troublemakers"* lies in elevating documentary from an aesthetic style to a form of political rhetoric. When Ye hastily and terrifiedly leaves Xiong Laosan's house for the sudden nighttime conversation, the shaky hand-held video functions not merely as a stylistic choice but also as a technological metaphor for resistance against power. This "media self-reflexivity" echoes Habermas's critique of the technologization of the public sphere: The democratization of the image does not dissolve power, but becomes a new battlefield for discipline (Habermas 1989, 156). The Sixth Generation's work also embodies a spatial politics of localization. Wang Xiaoshuai's *"Green Red"* (2005), with its third-line factory, contrasts with Cao Baoping's depiction of a Yunnan village in terms of spatial politics. In the scene of the village committee under the control of the Xiong family, the director reveals the topology of power through architectural archaeology: the Soviet-style brick structure built in 1958 (with a tall gatehouse and high walls of green bricks), the aluminum alloy security grille prevalent in the 1990s, and the electronic clock typical of around 2000 (which always remains at 19:84) together constitute a triple temporal stratum, constructing a

Foucault's heterotopia. This spatial coding transcends Jia Zhangke's superficial record of demolition sites and directly points to the spatial and temporal dislocation of grassroots governance (Zhang 2017, 168).

3.5.1 Character Setting, Power Network, and Narrative Dynamics

The "Troublemakers" exudes a strong sense of critique and maintains high tension. Director Cao Baoping profoundly exposes the phenomenon of grassroots power alienation through a meticulously constructed allegorical structure. This structure not only reveals the severity and complexity of power alienation at the grassroots level but also conveys the force of reform and justice through the struggle between good and evil. The following is a detailed analysis of how the director constructed this allegorical structure.

The Xiong family consists of four brothers, each exercising power in a distinct but interrelated manner, collectively forming a tightly knit network that dominates grassroots authority in Heijingcun. The eldest brother, characterized by his rudeness and violent temperament, serves as the head of security and maintains control through intimidation and physical coercion. The second brother, the village accountant, is cunning and manipulative, skillfully exploiting his position for personal gain. The third brother, the village headman, is particularly sinister and corrupt, using his official role to enrich himself at the expense of the community. The youngest brother is a rogue who shamelessly indulges in sexual exploits, making him the most morally corrupt of the four. Through this combination of formal authority, strategic manipulation, and personal vice, the Xiong brothers consolidate their dominance over the village, creating a pervasive and multifaceted power network.

Opposing this entrenched network is Village Clerk Ye Guangrong, the newly appointed village branch secretary. Upright and principled, Ye represents the forces of justice and reform, challenging the Xiong brothers' entrenched control. His interventions—though initially limited—introduce the possibility of disrupting the alienation of grassroots authority and restoring ethical governance. Within the narrative, the tension between Ye's reformist ideals and the Xiong brothers' exploitation of power drives the plot, shaping both the emotional and political stakes of the story. The film thus establishes a clear moral and social framework: the Xiong brothers embody the corruption and abuse inherent in unchecked local power, while Ye symbolizes accountability, justice, and the potential for systemic change.

By setting up this power dynamic early in the film, the director not only frames the central conflict but also provides the audience with a lens through which to interpret subsequent acts of rebellion, emotional escalation, and ultimate catharsis. The interplay between the characters' positions and personalities allows the narrative to explore the mechanisms of power at the grassroots level, illustrating how authority can become alienated and how individual integrity can challenge systemic corruption.

3.5.2 Plot Design and Conflict Presentation

The villagers of Heijingcun have long suffered under the oppressive control of the Xiong brothers, yet their fear of and dependence on entrenched power prevents them from voicing their grievances. This combination of intimidation and attachment not only reinforces the Xiong brothers' dominance but also deepens the alienation of grassroots authority.

In response, Ye, the newly appointed village branch secretary, attempts to challenge this entrenched power through legal and bureaucratic channels. Despite his moral integrity, Ye faces significant obstacles, including a lack of evidence and institutional inertia, which limit the immediate effectiveness of his efforts. Recognizing the constraints of formal procedures, he ultimately decides to mobilize the villagers, organizing a coordinated effort to apprehend the Xiong brothers. The rallying slogan, "Overthrow the Gang Four, there is hope for Heijingcun", serves not only as a call to action but also as a symbolic articulation of collective agency against systemic oppression.

The arrest operation, however, is fraught with setbacks and unexpected complications, highlighting the unpredictability and inherent difficulties of confronting deeply entrenched power structures. At several points, the effort nearly collapses, underscoring the complexities of social mobilization in a context of fear and corruption. Ultimately, the intervention of a group of police officers turns the tide, allowing the villagers to achieve their objective and reclaim a measure of justice.

Through this sequence of narrative developments, the film demonstrates both the seriousness and the multi-layered nature of grassroots power alienation. Simultaneously, it conveys the challenges, uncertainties, and potential for collective action inherent in efforts to disrupt such entrenched authority, as exemplified by Ye's strategic decisions and the villagers' eventual mobilization. The plot design thus not only maintains dramatic tension but also reinforces the thematic exploration of power, resistance, and social justice.

3.5.3 Symbolism

"Troublemakers" employs a cold and realistic visual style, capturing the dilapidation of Heijingcun and the villagers' daily suffering through deliberate camera language. This approach not only heightens the sense of immersion but also allows the audience to apprehend the dangers of grassroots power alienation more profoundly.

The film further incorporates symbolic elements to convey thematic meaning. The positions, identities, and violent tactics of the four Xiong brothers symbolize the alienation and abuse of power at the grassroots level, while Ye Guangrong embodies the forces of justice and reform, representing the possibility of ethical governance and collective resistance.

The film can also be read as a poetics of resistance against censorship. In the original script, the ending scene depicted the villagers spontaneously hanging Xiong Laosan (New Works in

Cinema, No. 5, 2006, 29). In the released version, however, the scene was altered so that the police suddenly descend to apprehend the evildoers. The director achieves textual subversion through the encoding of images: the red and blue overhead lights of the police car cast shadows resembling prison bars across the villagers' faces. This strategy of "apparent obedience and substantive deconstruction" aligns with Jameson's theory of ideology, suggesting that defiant meaning emerges from the fissures within dominant discourse (Jameson 1981, 87).

Nevertheless, the film exhibits certain limitations, particularly in its reduction of the villagers to a "group portrait of sufferers," resulting in a lack of individualized character development. A representative example is Dawang, who repeatedly appears in a fixed image holding his wife's crutch. Humiliated by his wife's illicit relationship with Xiong Laoshi yet too fearful to speak out, Dawang's personal motivations are ultimately subordinated to the collective narrative of fury. This narrative simplification exemplifies Žižek's critique of the "post-political era", wherein complex social conflicts are often reduced to a binary struggle between good and evil (Žižek 2008, 121).

"Troublemakers" redefines "fury" as a distinct aesthetic category, transforming it in ways that extend beyond the conventional depiction of emotion. Rather than remaining solely a reflection of a character's internal state, fury operates as a central structural element within the film. It drives the narrative momentum, guiding the movement of the camera—such as the dynamic tracking shots during riot sequences—and shaping the rhythm of editing, exemplified by the crosscutting in telephone scenes. In addition, fury transcends narrative content to influence formal aspects of the film. The use of a blue-toned color palette during the late-night action sequences mirrors the intensity of fury, effectively creating a parallel system of visual representation in which color itself becomes a conduit of emotional expression. Furthermore, the experience of fury evolves from mere catharsis to a more reflective and critical engagement. Symbolic imagery, such as the "cuckoo clock", combined with the film's open-ended conclusion, transforms the depiction of violence into a Brechtian effect of dissociation, inviting the audience to step back and critically examine the social and moral implications of the characters' actions. This progression aligns with Rancière's theory of the "distribution of perceptibility", which suggests that aesthetic revolution emerges from the reconfiguration of perceptual coordinates (Rancière 2004, 63).

From the perspective of localized aesthetics, "Troublemakers" introduces innovative approaches to realism. Technically, the combination of hand-held cinematography and dialectal sound design creates an audio-visual syntax that can be described as "rustic modernity"⁴³, blending regional authenticity with stylistic sophistication. Industrially, the film's modest production budget of 8 million CNY, partially subsidized (35%) by the local Yunnan government, demonstrates the feasibility of a sustainable regional cinematic economy.

⁴³ In rural China, a significant portion of the population primarily communicates in local dialects, whereas news media, including television and radio, predominantly use Mandarin. This linguistic divide has contributed to the conventional perception of Mandarin as a marker of modernity and dialects as vernacular. When employed in film—a medium often associated with modern artistic expression—dialect creates a unique aesthetic tension, producing a style that can be described as a "chic yet rustic modernity".

Culturally, the film achieves a significant breakthrough: its allegorical depiction of grassroots power, embodied in the figure of the four Xiong brothers, provides a model for critical and politically sensitive storytelling, navigating the constraints imposed by censorship while offering a compelling space for social reflection. In this way, “The Troublemakers” transforms fury into a multidimensional aesthetic category that bridges emotion, form, and critical engagement, while simultaneously asserting the viability of a localized, socially conscious cinematic practice.

Chapter 4 The Intersection of Reality and Fantasy: “The Equation of Love and Death” 李米的猜想 (2008)

4.1 Introduction

Scenario

The film “The Equation of Love and Death” (李米的猜想) tells the twisted story of Li Mi (李米), a female taxi driver who has been obsessively pursuing her missing fiancé, Fang Wen (方文), for four years. The story begins with the sudden disappearance of Fang Wen, one day, leaving her to face the hardships of life alone. During these four years, although Li Mi has been receiving letters from Fang Wen informing her of his recent situation, these letters do not have a sending address, which makes it impossible for Li Mi to locate him. Li Mi pasted Fang Wen's photo in magazines, and whenever a passenger got on the ride, she would ask them if they had ever seen this man.

One day, Li Mi accidentally picked up two drug dealers, Qiu Shuitian 裘水天 and Qiu Huogui 裘火贵, who had come to Kunming from Yunnan expecting to trade. The dealers discover that their “contact” has somehow fallen off a bridge and died, yet in a panic they discover Li Mi, who is giving them the change for the ride cost. Qiu Huo Gui tries to rob the money from Li Mi and head back to his hometown, but Li Mi takes her change halfway and calls the police. Meanwhile, Qiu Shuitian releases Li Mi after she lies about knowing Xiao Xiang, his first love. At the same time, the fallen bridge “contactor” crashes into the front of Ma Bing's and Fei Fei's car, who are involuntarily implicated in the murder. Li Mi accidentally discovers Fang Wen at the police station - Ma Bing 马冰 and Fang Wen look identical! However, Ma Bing is very indifferent to Li Mi's recognition, which makes Li Mi feel very painful and confused.

With the plot deepening, Li Mi gradually uncovers the truth of Fang Wen's disappearance. It turns out that Fang Wen, who was trying to save up money to start a supermarket, accidentally got involved in the circle of drug trafficking and renamed himself Ma Bing. He has been keeping a close eye on Li Mi behind her back, without being able to reunite with her. In the climax of the film, Li Mi and Ma Bing (Fang Wen) finally confront each other. Li Mi takes out all the letters that Fang Wen has written to her and asks for a handwriting match. Fang Wen desperately admits that he is Fang Wen but has fallen for Feifei and wants Li Mi to forget about him so that she doesn't need to be involved.

At the end of the film, Fang Wen opts to jump off a bridge. He leaves Li Mi a large fortune and a video tape of her daily life over the past four years, which he secretly filmed. Li Mi cries and laughs over the video, and eventually things come to peace.

Through the story of Li Mi and Fang Wen, the film shows the pressure and spiritual loss of modern people, as well as their persistence and helplessness in love. As a holistic art, the film

carries a director's artistic expression and social reflection on multiple levels, including image, sound, and narrative structure. Recently, China's film market has experienced an evolution from being dominated by commercial blockbusters to the diversification of genres. In this process, many filmmakers have attempted to break the narrative framework of traditional genres by integrating realism, aesthetic experimentation, and cross-genre elements, to find a balance between marketability and artistic exploration (Luo 2016, 26-28). Cao Baoping is one of these representative directors. His films are known for their strong realism, unique narrative style, and deep characterization, and he is particularly good at incorporating social metaphors and individual psychology within the framework of genre films (Li 2017).

“The Equation of Love and Death” is Cao Baoping's highly experimental work after “The Troublemakers” in 2006. Through a non-linear narrative, and interlocking time and space structures, by blurring the boundaries between reality and fantasy, this film creates an emotional world full of suspense and conflict (Chen 2018, 23). The film's central character, Li Mi, is a taxi driver who has been searching for her missing boyfriend, Fang Wen, for four years, her search is not only an external detective investigation but also an internal psychological journey. In the process, the audience witnesses not only Li Mi's sentimental world but also enters a narrative space interwoven by reality and fantasy (Hong 2017). The central questions of concern in this chapter are: how does the film blur the boundaries between reality and fantasy through its aesthetic and narrative strategies? How does this blurring affect the audience's cognitive and emotional experience? To answer these questions, I will, in this chapter, analyze the film from the perspectives of narrative structure, visual style, sound design, characterization, etc. and discuss how the film constructs a multi-layered narrative space through visual and auditory language, taking into account the relevant studies in film narrative, aesthetic theory, and cognitive cinematography (Boedwell 1985; Branigan 1992).

In the expanding field of scholarship on “The Equation of Love and Death”, researchers have examined Cao Baoping's work from various theoretical perspectives, yet most agree on its distinctive realist foundation. Luo observes that Cao's films consistently portray the contradictions and moral dilemmas of China's social transformation through a restrained visual realism that highlights the marginalized figures of contemporary society (Luo 2016, 26–28). This realism is manifested not only in the narrative focus on ordinary lives but also in the formal use of handheld cinematography, natural lighting, and non-professional actors, recalling Bazin's advocacy of cinematic realism as a means of preserving the ambiguity of reality (Bazin 2005, 45).

Other critics have emphasized the film's non-linear narrative and its interwoven perspectives. Yao and Qiao argue that the film's structure produces a “delayed comprehension” effect by interlacing multiple narrative threads and withholding crucial information, compelling spectators to reconstruct the story through cognitive inference and speculation (Yao; Qiao 2009, 106–109). Building on this insight, my study interprets narrative fragmentation not as a stylistic flourish but as a cognitive mechanism that engages viewers in meaning construction. Drawing on Bordwell's theory of cognitive narratology, I argue that Cao Baoping uses temporal

shifts and perspective alternation to externalize Li Mi's disoriented consciousness and to mirror the fractured perception characteristic of urban modernity (Bordwell 2006, 121–123).

Visually, the film's aesthetic has been analyzed as an interplay between realism and psychological stylization. Li Jiaying notes that Cao's use of close-ups and enclosed urban spaces intensifies emotional tension, transforming the city into a labyrinth of psychological confinement (Li 2017, 74–75). My interpretation expands on Li's observation by linking this spatial constriction to Deleuze's time-image theory, which identifies moments in cinema where time is expressed through subjective perception rather than linear causality (Deleuze 1985, 37–39). The film's low-saturation color palette and cold tonal design thus function not merely as stylistic choices but as visual metaphors for Li Mi's existential dislocation, where the boundary between reality and memory collapses.

From a feminist perspective, scholars have debated whether Li Mi's characterization subverts or perpetuates patriarchal tropes. Hong Xiaoli contends that while Li Mi assumes the traditionally masculine role of a detective, her actions remain shaped by emotional dependency, echoing conventional depictions of female vulnerability (Hong 2015, 64–65). In contrast, Mulvey's notion of the "male gaze" provides a critical framework for reinterpreting Li Mi as a figure who resists objectification through her self-determined search for truth (Mulvey 1975, 6–18). This paper adopts an intermediary position: although Li Mi's subjectivity is bound by emotional longing, her pursuit of agency constitutes a rearticulation of female desire within a patriarchal and transitional Chinese society.

Genre analysis further situates "The Equation of Love and Death" within the broader transformation of Chinese cinema. Bordwell notes that Cao's blending of crime, romance, and suspense genres marks a shift from externally driven narratives toward interiorized psychological exploration (Bordwell 2006, 142). This hybridity underlines my argument that Cao's film replaces traditional suspense mechanisms with a cognitive engagement between viewer and text, positioning emotional realism as the new narrative core of genre innovation.

Despite the richness of existing research, few studies have systematically examined how Cao Baoping's integration of sound, image, and narrative manipulates audience perception and emotion. This study therefore employs an interdisciplinary framework combining cognitive narratology, film aesthetics, and feminist theory. Rather than treating these frameworks as abstract methodologies, they are applied directly to the film's narrative and formal structure: Bordwell's and Genette's insights illuminate the manipulation of narrative time and information; Bazin's and Deleuze's theories elucidate the interdependence of realism and subjectivity; and Mulvey's feminist perspective allows for a reconsideration of Li Mi's linguistic and emotional agency.

Through this integrated approach, this chapter seeks to bridge aesthetic theory and cognitive film studies, demonstrating how "The Equation of Love and Death" translates psychological dissonance into cinematic form. Cao Baoping's use of fragmented narrative, muted visual style, and expressive sound design creates a multi-layered representation of alienation, allowing the

spectator to participate cognitively and emotionally in the film's construction of meaning. Therefore, this synthesis of narrative, image, and sound not only redefines the contours of contemporary Chinese realism but also expands the theoretical vocabulary through which such realism can be understood.

4.2 Narration Strategy

4.2.1 Fragmented Narratives and the Non-Linear Structure

With its distinctive narrative strategy, "The Equation of Love and Death" immerses the audience in a world charged with suspense and emotional complexity. The film's non-linear narrative is not merely a stylistic embellishment but a technical and conceptual framework that redefines spectatorship. Through fragmented storytelling and temporal disjunction, director Cao Baoping constructs a narrative form that invites the audience to participate actively in reconstructing meaning. The film achieves this non-linearity through a carefully orchestrated interlacing of storylines, the manipulation of editing and perspective to provoke conjecture, and the deliberate use of information gaps and cinematic misdirection to sustain suspense and interpretive tension.

The dismantling of linear progression in "The Equation of Love and Death" is realized through the interweaving of three narrative strands—Li Mi's investigation, the police pursuit, and the drug dealers' escape—which coexist in a state of temporal and causal ambiguity. This intricate structure is achieved through cross-cutting editing and parallel montage, techniques that juxtapose spatially and temporally distinct scenes, thereby dissolving the boundaries of linear time. As Bordwell (1985) observes, non-linear narration "invites the viewer to reconstruct the story's causal chain through active cognitive engagement rather than passive absorption" (Bordwell 1985, 57). Cao's editing thus transforms spectatorship into an act of intellectual reconstruction, as viewers oscillate between fragmented clues in their attempt to synthesize coherence.

The interplay of these threads is not only narrative but also thematic. Li Mi's desperate search for her lover provides emotional intensity; the police's procedural investigation injects rational order; and the drug dealers' flight exposes the moral decay of the underworld. Through the rhythm of abrupt cuts, temporal ellipses, and repeated visual motifs, Cao synchronizes the form of the narrative with its emotional content, rendering the film both structurally complex and psychologically resonant. This technique aligns with Robert McKee's concept of the "complex plot structure", wherein multiple interdependent storylines converge to generate heightened dramatic tension and intellectual depth (McKee 1997, 219).

The Chinese title "Li Mi's Conjecture" (李米的猜想) encapsulates the film's structural essence: conjecture functions as both theme and technique. The non-linear structure is sustained through manipulations of perspective, achieved by alternating between subjective and objective viewpoints, temporal loops, and delayed revelations. This continual shifting of

perspective induces a state of epistemic instability, compelling the audience to infer unseen causal relations. As Radford notes, narrative comprehension arises from a process of “filling in the blanks left by omission and displacement” (Radford 1996, 143). In this sense, Cao’s technical manipulation of editing—particularly his use of temporal fragmentation and withheld information—constructs a cinematic space that demands interpretive participation.

By withholding key visual and narrative cues, Cao places the viewer in a cognitive position analogous to that of Li Mi herself: both are investigators trapped within partial knowledge. The diegetic misalignment—achieved through flashbacks that lack temporal anchors and abrupt changes in focalization—further destabilizes narrative certainty. The resulting disorientation becomes a core aesthetic strategy, transforming the film into a self-reflexive exploration of how stories and meanings are constructed under conditions of uncertainty.

Suspense in “The Equation of Love and Death” arises not from direct revelation but from carefully crafted absence. As Herman and Chomsky argue, media forms—including cinema—maintain engagement by “controlling the flow and visibility of information to shape audience perception” (Chomsky 1988, 2). Cao deploys this principle through elliptical editing, off-screen sound, and non-linear revelation, creating an asymmetrical relationship between audience and character knowledge. The strategic delay in revealing critical information ensures that spectators remain in a perpetual state of conjecture, mirroring the film’s title and thematic logic.

Cinematically, these techniques are reinforced through visual and aural cues: recurring images of highways, refrains of mechanical sounds, and fragmented flashbacks serve as misleading anchors that challenge the viewer’s assumptions. Such formal misdirection operates as a cinematic analogue to narrative deception, echoing Metz’s assertion that film language constructs meaning “through absence as much as through presence” (Metz 1971, 126). In Cao’s film, absence becomes the organizing principle of suspense—what the audience cannot see or fully understand drives the emotional and cognitive intensity of the viewing experience.

Through the deliberate orchestration of cross-cutting, temporal ellipsis, and perspective manipulation, This film achieves a sophisticated non-linear narrative that fuses technical precision with thematic depth. Cao Baoping’s film thus demonstrates how non-linear structure functions as a technical mechanism for creating conjecture, emotional engagement, and intellectual participation. Rather than merely disrupting chronology, the non-linear design becomes an expressive tool that mirrors the fragmentation of perception and emotion at the heart of the film’s narrative universe.

4.2.2 Intertwining Reality and Fantasy

In “The Equation of Love and Death”, director Cao Baoping constructs a complex interplay between reality and fantasy through both narrative structure and visual design. This blurring of boundaries serves not merely as an aesthetic device, but as a reflection of Li Mi’s fragmented psychological state, revealing the porous relationship between subjective experience and

external reality. Through non-linear storytelling, atmospheric cinematography, and auditory manipulation, Cao crafts a cinematic world that embodies the existential entanglement of perception, imagination, and being—an approach that resonates deeply with Jean-Paul Sartre’s existential philosophy.

The fusion of reality and fantasy is first achieved through the film’s fragmented and non-linear narrative, which deliberately dismantles the coherence of temporal progression. Scenes are presented in a discontinuous, seemingly arbitrary order, compelling the audience to reconstruct causality retrospectively. This disjunction mirrors Li Mi’s unstable mental landscape, in which memory, longing, and perception intermingle. Sartre observes that “the imaginary world is not opposed to the real world; rather, it is the real grasped as a possibility of consciousness” (Sartre 1956, 181). Cao’s manipulation of narrative temporality thus externalizes Li Mi’s consciousness, transforming her interior psychological turbulence into cinematic form. The constant temporal shifts and narrative gaps create a state of perceptual ambiguity, aligning the audience’s experience with Li Mi’s own disorientation and emotional instability.



Figure 4.2.1

Visual techniques further accentuate this narrative strategy. Through dynamic variations of lighting, color palette, and shadow, the film evokes a dreamlike atmosphere in which the real and the unreal interpenetrate. Warm hues and soft lighting often accompany Li Mi’s recollections of her lover, imbuing them with a nostalgic, almost hallucinatory quality, while colder, desaturated tones (Figure 4.2.1) dominate scenes of her present struggles, underscoring the alienation of her current reality. This dialectical use of color constructs a visual metaphor for Li Mi’s psychological oscillation between hope and despair. Sartre’s notion that consciousness perpetually “transcends the given toward what is not yet” (Sartre 1956, 182) finds resonance here, as Li Mi’s visual world becomes the projection of her desire for reunion and transcendence.

The sound design of the film also plays an integral role in sustaining the fluid boundary between reality and fantasy. Ambient noise, fragmented dialogue, and melancholic music blend into one another, often overlapping in ways that obscure the source of sound. This auditory ambiguity reinforces the uncertainty of the visual field, suggesting that the boundaries between diegetic and psychological sound are intentionally dissolved. The result is a layered sensory experience that situates the viewer within Li Mi's subjectivity, making her internal world indistinguishable from the cinematic environment that surrounds her.

The interaction between Li Mi's inner world and the external environment constitutes the emotional and philosophical core of the film. Her obsessive search for her missing lover, Fang Wen, operates simultaneously as an external journey through the physical world and an internal exploration of her fragmented psyche. At the narrative level, her encounters with strangers—such as the conversations with taxi passengers—reflect her attempt to reconcile the emotional void within by projecting her longing outward. These dialogues function as both narrative devices that propel the plot and psychological mirrors that reveal the fragility of her emotional state. Her evolving reactions to others reveal the dynamic interaction between psychological interiority and environmental stimulus, echoing the psychodynamic principle that human behavior emerges from the dialectic between the inner world and external conditions (Freud 1923, 19).

As Li Mi's journey unfolds, her internal transformation becomes increasingly apparent. The trajectory of her search marks a progression from anxious dependence to self-realization. Her interactions with the two drug traffickers—who mirror her own distorted pursuit of meaning through their obsession with money—confront her with alternative expressions of desire and alienation. This mirroring effect serves as a psychological catalyst: by witnessing in others the destructive potential of obsession, Li Mi gradually achieves a measure of existential clarity. She comes to recognize that her relentless search for Fang Wen represents not merely a quest for love but a struggle for identity and purpose within an indifferent reality. The convergence of these encounters culminates in Li Mi's realization that her inner transformation is inseparable from her confrontation with the world's moral and emotional chaos.

Cao Baoping further intensifies this philosophical dimension through his technique of spatial and temporal dislocation. The film's structure collapses the boundaries between past, present, and imagined futures, creating a hybrid temporality in which memory and fantasy infiltrate the present. This intertwining of temporal layers situates the viewer within a liminal zone of perception, where it becomes impossible to distinguish objective reality from subjective vision. Li Mi's flashbacks to her time with Fang Wen are not presented as recollections but as living presences—cinematic moments that invade the now. Such dislocation, in which “the real and the imagined merge into a hyperreal continuity,” recalls Baudrillard's concept of simulation, wherein representation ceases to signify reality and instead becomes its substitute (Baudrillard 1994, 6). The narrative's recursive structure thereby dissolves the traditional boundaries between memory, imagination, and perception, rendering the film's diegesis a psychological space as much as a physical one.

In the final analysis, “The Equation of Love and Death” exemplifies how cinematic form can materialize the existential entanglement of consciousness and reality. Through non-linear narrative, chromatic symbolism, sound manipulation, and temporal dislocation, Cao Baoping crafts a cinematic universe where reality and fantasy exist in a constant state of mutual contamination. The film’s fragmented form and sensory ambiguity reflect not only Li Mi’s internal disarray but also a broader existential truth: that human perception is always a negotiation between the real and the imagined, the actual and the possible. As Sartre reminds us, “consciousness is haunted by what it lacks—it imagines to exist” (Sartre 1956, 184). Cao’s film translates this philosophical insight into cinematic language, creating a narrative that is both emotionally visceral and intellectually profound.

4.2.3 Perspective Drift and Information Manipulation

In “The Equation of Love and Death”, director Cao Baoping constructs a multilayered narrative space imbued with suspense, emotional complexity, and moral ambiguity through the subtle manipulation of perspective and information. By alternating between subjective and objective viewpoints, Cao transforms spectatorship into a dynamic and interpretive act, compelling the audience to oscillate between empathy and critical distance. This technique not only sustains narrative tension but also deepens the viewer’s cognitive engagement with the film’s exploration of human desire, alienation, and moral conflict.

The strategic shifting between subjective and objective perspectives constitutes the core of the film’s narrative sophistication. Drawing on what cognitive film theory terms perspective adjustment—a viewer’s adaptation of interpretive frameworks in response to changing points of view—the film leads the audience to move between emotional immersion and analytical reflection. The frequent use of Li Mi’s perspective allows the audience to inhabit her interior world, sharing her obsessive longing for Fang Wen and her descent into emotional turbulence. This subjective viewpoint grants the film an intimate immediacy, aligning perception with Li Mi’s fragmented consciousness. Yet, Cao intermittently withdraws this intimacy by introducing an objective perspective that recontextualizes her experiences within a broader social and moral framework. As Bordwell (1985) observes, “the diversity of narrative perspectives enriches the interpretive complexity of film, enabling viewers to perceive the same event through multiple cognitive and emotional lenses” (Bordwell 1985, 142). Through this deliberate alternation, Cao achieves both psychological depth and narrative balance, allowing the audience to engage with the film simultaneously as participant and observer.

The interplay between what may be termed the “peek” and the “gaze” further amplifies this dynamic. Borrowing from Laura Mulvey’s (1975) theory of the “male gaze”, Cao reconfigures voyeurism not as a gendered structure of desire but as a universal mode of cinematic spectatorship, wherein both characters and audience engage in acts of seeing that reveal and conceal inner truth. The “peek” perspective—characterized by moments in which viewers see through a character’s eyes—draws spectators into an intimate proximity with private emotion. Through Li Mi’s first-person perspective, the audience “peeps” into her moments of solitude: reading Fang Wen’s letters, revisiting old memories, or searching the city streets in despair.

Each act of looking becomes both revelation and concealment, exposing Li Mi's psychological vulnerability while simultaneously withholding full comprehension of her motives. This voyeuristic alignment invites empathy, but also implicates the audience in the act of emotional intrusion.

At the same time, Cao employs the "gaze" perspective to shift the audience's position toward critical distance. Through the detached observations of characters such as the police officer Ye Qingcheng, the viewer becomes an external witness to the moral and social complexities that frame Li Mi's private turmoil. This oscillation between proximity and distance aligns with Mieke Bal's concept of the "dynamic narrative center," which posits that the focal point of narration is not fixed but fluid, evolving in accordance with the movement of perspectives (Bal 1997, 156). The shifting gaze destabilizes narrative hierarchy, redistributing interpretive authority among characters and viewers alike. Consequently, the film resists a single moral standpoint, presenting instead a kaleidoscopic interplay of motivations and ethical ambiguities.

What is most remarkable is how the film intertwines "peeking" and "gazing" into a seamless visual and emotional continuum. The viewer alternates between inhabiting the subjective gaze of Li Mi—feeling her emotional intensity—and observing her actions from the detached stance of a bystander. For instance, in the climactic reunion scene between Li Mi and Fang Wen, the camera's oscillation between close-up subjective framing and wide-shot detachment allows the audience to both feel her longing and assess its futility. This perspectival duality enhances the narrative's psychological realism: while the "peek" invites identification, the "gaze" reintroduces critical reflection. Together, these alternating viewpoints construct a rhythm of empathy and estrangement that mirrors the instability of Li Mi's own consciousness.

Cao Baoping's "The Equation of Love and Death" exemplifies how filmic text constructs perceptual meaning through strategies rooted in reception aesthetics. The director's manipulation of perspective and control of information function not merely as stylistic devices but as deliberate aesthetic "offers" to the viewer, inviting interpretive participation. In the tradition of Wolfgang Iser's reception theory, meaning in the film does not preexist within the text but is generated through the dynamic interaction between cinematic cues and the spectator's perceptual and cognitive activity (Iser 1978, 22). The fragmented narrative, oscillating perspectives, and deliberate information gaps together transform the act of viewing into an experience of active meaning-making, in which the audience's interpretive engagement becomes the very locus of narrative coherence.

Cao constructs his narrative space as a field of interpretive negotiation, where the viewer is compelled to fill in the blanks of perception and inference. The withholding and dispersion of crucial narrative details across multiple viewpoints invite spectators to reconstruct meaning from partial, and often contradictory, fragments. This aesthetic of incompleteness echoes Daniel Dennett's notion of the "narrative self", whereby both individuals and spectators organize dispersed experiences into coherent wholes as a way of comprehending the real (Dennett 1991, 418). In "The Equation of Love and Death", the spectator becomes a "co-author" of narrative meaning, engaging in a process of conjectural reconstruction that parallels Li Mi's

own obsessive attempt to piece together the mystery of Fang Wen's disappearance. In this sense, Cao's film enacts the very structure of reception: it offers perceptual stimuli that can only acquire significance through the viewer's cognitive participation.

The film's perspectival shifts are central to this aesthetic of reception. Li Mi's subjective perspective forms the emotional nucleus of the film's narrative and visual design. The use of handheld camera movements, tight framing, and shallow focus confines the spectator within Li Mi's psychological interiority, producing an affective alignment with her anxiety and longing. The viewer perceives not through an omniscient gaze but through the limited and unstable frame of her subjectivity, which opens interpretive space rather than providing epistemic certainty. Each visual cue—her trembling hands, blurred visions, or obsessive searches—functions as an invitation for empathetic engagement, eliciting what Hans Robert Jauss calls the “aesthetic response”, wherein the spectator's perceptual and emotional faculties are mobilized to complete the unfinished work of meaning (Jauss 1982, 25).

By contrast, the fragmented and elusive perspective of Fang Wen (or Ma Bing) complicates this perceptual process, offering dissonant glimpses into guilt, deception, and moral decay. The contradiction between his actions and Li Mi's idealized memory of him destabilizes the audience's interpretive horizon, compelling continuous reassessment. These alternating focalizations—between Li Mi's internalized vision and Fang Wen's externalized reality—create what Iser (1978) describes as “gaps of indeterminacy”, which the audience must actively bridge through imagination (Iser 1978, 50). The spectator's task thus mirrors the characters' own epistemic struggle: to reconcile conflicting fragments of perception into a meaningful whole.

Additional perspectives, such as those of Qiu Shuitian and Ye Qingcheng, extend this receptional complexity by situating Li Mi's personal obsession within a social and moral landscape. The police's detached surveillance offers an objective counterpoint to Li Mi's subjectivity, while the drug traffickers' desperate viewpoint exposes the socioeconomic and existential decay underlying the film's moral universe. Each perspective operates as a “receptional node”, a site of perceptual offering that challenges the audience to shift interpretive positions and synthesize diverse epistemic registers. The spectator, moving between empathy and estrangement, is thus continuously negotiating meaning within a network of incomplete and intersecting viewpoints.

Through these continuous shifts of focalization, Cao constructs what can be termed a polyphonic perceptual field. Every perspective simultaneously reveals and conceals, producing a dialectic of knowledge and uncertainty. The spectator's engagement becomes an act of ongoing interpretation—assembling, questioning, and revising hypotheses in response to the film's perceptual cues. This process exemplifies what Iser calls the “aesthetic of reception”, in which the text provides structured gaps and stimuli that activate the viewer's imaginative faculties, allowing meaning to emerge as a collaborative construction rather than a fixed revelation (Iser 1978, 38).

Finally, Cao Baoping's mastery lies in transforming instability into an aesthetic principle. The film's manipulation of perception and information functions as a meta-commentary on spectatorship itself: meaning arises not from what is seen, but from how the viewer makes sense of seeing. The ambiguity, fragmentation, and perspectival drift do not obscure meaning but constitute the very conditions under which meaning becomes possible. Through the interplay of narrative fragmentation, perceptual incompleteness, and cognitive reconstruction, "The Equation of Love and Death" invites the audience to participate in an aesthetic experience of uncertainty—an epistemological journey where reception is indistinguishable from revelation.

4.3 Photographic Aesthetics

This film employs a distinctive visual language system that interlaces narrative complexity with emotional depth, constructing a cinematic fabric where realism and symbolism coexist in delicate balance. The film's visual design not only delineates the coarse texture of everyday reality with meticulous precision but also externalizes the protagonists' psychological turbulence and existential anxiety. Through its refined use of cinematography, color, lighting, and spatial composition, the film transforms inner emotion and moral tension into a coherent visual experience, allowing the audience to perceive meaning through both aesthetic form and sensory engagement. This process exemplifies what David Bordwell terms "parametric narration", where style itself becomes a vehicle for narrative meaning (Bordwell 1985, 48).

In terms of cinematography, flexible handheld shots, intimate close-ups, and carefully composed long takes immerse the viewer in the characters' emotional worlds while preserving a subtle observational distance. The trembling motion of the handheld camera mirrors Li Mi's unstable mental state, while the recurring close-ups (such as figure 4.3.1) capture fleeting emotions beneath her composure. In contrast, long takes situate these internal struggles within the vast, impersonal urban environment, creating a rhythmic interplay between empathy and detachment. This oscillation between proximity and distance corresponds to Gilles Deleuze's notion of the "time-image", where the visual field becomes a site for the coexistence of perception and memory, movement and stillness (Deleuze 1989, 41). Within this shifting visual rhythm, the audience becomes both participant and observer—drawn into Li Mi's inner world yet constantly aware of the dissonance between subjective emotion and external reality.



Figure 4.3.1

Color, light, and shadow further enrich the film's visual texture. The predominance of low-saturation tones—muted grays, washed-out blues, and faded yellows—evokes a sense of emotional exhaustion and spiritual detachment, visually echoing the characters' alienation. Meanwhile, the alternation of light and darkness functions as both visual contrast and narrative metaphor, articulating the oscillation between revelation and concealment, knowledge and uncertainty. This play of illumination transforms vision itself into a process of interpretation, inviting the audience to search for meaning in ambiguity.

Spatial design also performs a crucial narrative function. Recurrent motifs such as taxis, winding streets, and urban “non-spaces” (highways, parking lots, intersections) construct a sense of displacement and fragmentation. The taxi, both enclosed and mobile, becomes a liminal site of confession and revelation, while the cityscape mirrors Li Mi's psychological disorientation. As Thomas Elsaesser observes, modern cinema often turns space into “a field of affective intensity rather than a stable coordinate of geography” (Elsaesser 2009, 43), and Cao Baoping visualizes precisely this instability. The constant transformation and interweaving of spaces blur the boundary between reality and imagination, reinforcing the film's meditation on loss, love, and existential drift.

Through this synthesis of photographic aesthetics and narrative expression, “The Equation of Love and Death” transforms visual form into a language of emotion and thought. Each frame operates simultaneously as image and metaphor, drawing the audience into a perceptual dialogue with the film's inner world. Cao's visual strategy thus turns ambiguity and instability into aesthetic principles, creating a cinematic texture that conveys psychological truth and emotional depth through the interplay of light, color, and space.

4.3.1 Realistic Cinematic Language: Physical Presence and Psychological Exposure

In the film, Cao Baoping's use of handheld cinematography establishes a visual and affective texture that is both immediate and introspective. This aesthetic choice, characterized by its organic instability and tactile intimacy, departs from the smooth precision of conventional visual grammar and instead foregrounds a sense of embodied spectatorship. The trembling lens not only reflects the volatility of the diegetic world but also transforms the act of seeing into a bodily experience of being.

As Li Mi drives her worn taxi through the winding streets of Kunming, the handheld camera becomes an extension of her restless consciousness. Its subtle oscillations mirror her fluctuating emotional state—her yearning, fear, and persistent anxiety. The city, captured through trembling frames (Figure 4.3.2), emerges as both a physical environment and a psychological landscape, its instability mirroring Li Mi's inner turbulence. Laura U. Marks's theory of “haptic visuality” provides a critical lens through which to interpret this aesthetic effect: according to Marks, the image can evoke “a bodily empathy” that enables viewers to feel rather than merely see the screen (Marks 2000, 162). Each tremor of the camera thus functions as a sensory vibration that bridges the divide between the image and the viewer's body, eliciting a tactile

form of spectatorship. The audience does not simply observe Li Mi—they inhabit her perceptual world, sensing the pressure of her hands on the steering wheel and the rhythm of her breath as she navigates the city.



Figure 4.3.2

Through this intimate visual approach, Cao transforms the handheld image into a medium of psychological exposure. Its apparent rawness, rather than serving as an unmediated reflection of reality, becomes a carefully constructed aesthetic device. As André Bazin reminds us, “the myth of total cinema” lies not in mechanical reproduction but in the creation of an illusion of presence through cinematic form (Bazin 1967, 13). Similarly, the realism of “The Equation of Love and Death” is not a literal documentation of external reality but a perceptual simulation—a constructed sense of immediacy that enables deeper emotional and philosophical reflection. In this sense, handheld cinematography does not reproduce reality; it reconfigures it, transforming the chaotic vibrations of urban space into metaphors of dislocation, desire, and endurance.

Compared with the visual regularity and compositional stability pursued by mainstream cinema, the handheld technique in Cao’s film embraces imperfection as expressive potential. The camera’s instability dismantles compositional equilibrium, introducing an aesthetic of unpredictability that heightens both narrative tension and emotional authenticity. For instance, when Li Mi traverses the streets of Kunming, the camera alternates between tight framing near the car window—capturing fleeting urban reflections (Figure 4.3.3)—and wider shots that situate her solitude within the sprawling cityscape. Each shift in focal distance synchronizes with her psychological fluctuations, rendering her internal journey visible through the choreography of motion and perspective.

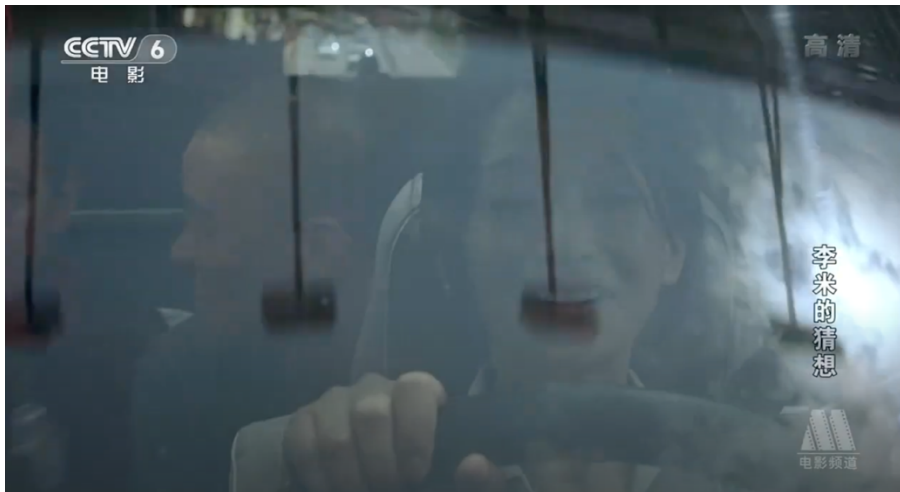


Figure 4.3.3

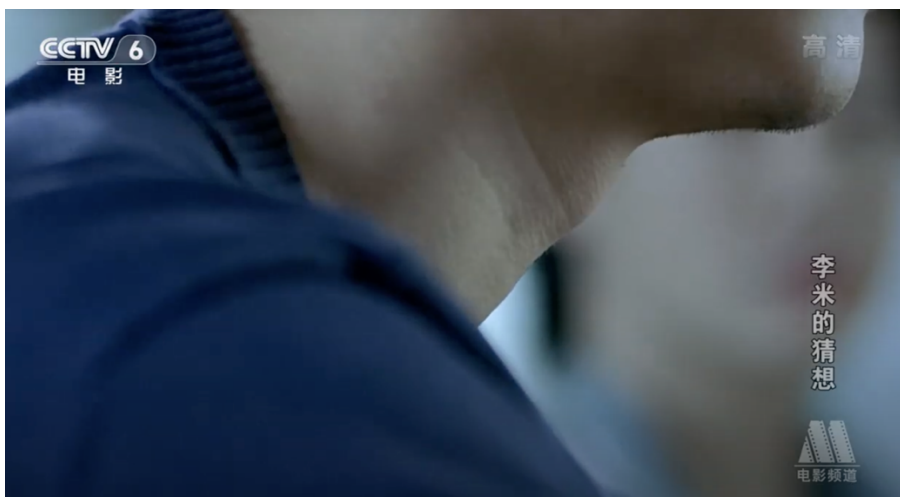


Figure 4.3.4

Consequently, handheld cinematography in “The Equation of Love and Death” generates what might be termed a documentary affect⁴⁴—a mode of realism grounded not in factual representation but in affective immediacy. It reconstructs, rather than reproduces, reality by transforming visual instability into a metaphor for human fragility. Each frame functions as both mirror and pulse, reflecting Li Mi’s resilience amid uncertainty and, by extension, the precarious vitality of human existence. The film’s visual turbulence becomes a poetic embodiment of the tension between hope and despair, presence and loss—anchoring its narrative within a sensorial field of empathy and reflection.

Cao Baoping’s mastery of close-up (Figure 4.3.4) cinematography in “The Equation of Love and Death” transforms the visual surface of the film into a site of psychological revelation. The close-up, as Béla Balázs (2010) observes, functions as a cinematic microscope capable of

⁴⁴ The term “documentary affect” describes a mode of cinematic engagement prioritizing the experiential realism of emotion over factual record or evidentiary argument. See Nichols, B. (2010). *Introduction to Documentary* (2nd ed.). Indiana University Press, p. 34.

“revealing the hidden play of facial expressions where the soul manifests itself” (Balázs 2010, 56). Cao adopts this approach not merely to magnify visual detail but to expose the fragile threshold between interior emotion and external image.



Figure 4.3.5

A striking example appears in the sequence where Li Mi sits in police station, repeatedly watching a videotape of her missing lover. The director employs an extended close-up that gradually narrows the frame until the camera hovers almost uncomfortably near her face. Within this intimate distance, Li Mi’s trembling pupils and cracked lips dominate the screen (Figure 4.3.5); every minute tremor, every unsteady breath becomes legible as a sign of emotional disintegration. Through this meticulous observation of micro physiognomy—the subtle movements through which psychological tension materializes (Balázs, 2010)—Cao externalizes Li Mi’s inner collapse. Her shaking pupils resemble fragile thresholds between sanity and despair, while her dry, fissured lips signify the erosion of hope during years of waiting. These corporeal details allow the audience to experience the material weight of her suffering, producing an affective immediacy that transcends verbal expression.

What makes this close-up particularly powerful is not its realism per se, but its ability to translate psychological tension into visual form. The intimacy of the camera violates the conventional aesthetic distance of classical cinema, replacing detached observation with perceptual proximity. This visual intrusion generates both empathy and discomfort—an emotional paradox central to Cao’s aesthetic. The spectator, positioned as an active gazer, is drawn into a silent dialogue with Li Mi, sharing her vulnerability while remaining conscious of the asymmetry of looking. Laura Mulvey’s concept of the “violence of the gaze” illuminates this moment: the gaze not only implies possession but also enacts a psychic exchange in which power and empathy coexist (Mulvey 1975, 11). In this scene, the viewer’s gaze becomes a conduit for affective resonance, transforming Li Mi’s private anguish into a collective emotional experience. Each spectator is invited to confront their own reflection within her suffering—to recognize, through her face, the universality of human despair and endurance.

Cao's use of close-up also demonstrates a sophisticated manipulation of cinematic focalization. By foregrounding Li Mi's facial micro-expressions, the director centers psychological interiority as the primary locus of narrative meaning. This visual strategy corresponds to David Bordwell's argument that film form operates as a system in which "every stylistic choice contributes to the viewer's construction of story meaning" (Bordwell & Thompson 2010, 75). Here, the tight framing and muted lighting within the car are not incidental but narratively functional: the dim, enclosed space embodies Li Mi's confusion and isolation, while the intermittent flashes of light outside the window suggest transient hope—a flicker of emotional persistence amid despair.

From a broader theoretical perspective, the close-up in "The Equation of Love and Death" does more than record facial detail; it constructs a phenomenological encounter between spectator and character. The gaze operates simultaneously as an epistemological tool and an ethical test: it invites intimacy while questioning the viewer's complicity in consuming another's pain. In this way, Cao transforms the close-up into an aesthetic of psychological exposure, where emotional truth emerges not through narrative exposition but through the sheer presence of the face. The trembling image becomes a metaphor for existential fragility, revealing, in each minute gesture, the precariousness of being and the persistence of longing.

Therefore, Cao Baoping's close-ups achieve what might be described as a cinema of empathy—a visual mode that bridges the distance between character and spectator through the mediation of affect. By rendering the invisible visible, the close-up transcends its technical function and becomes a philosophical gesture: a lens through which the film contemplates the boundaries between self and other, pain and recognition, image and emotion.

In cinematic language, the long take—characterized by its temporal continuity and spatial coherence—serves as a crucial medium through which filmmakers articulate emotional complexity and narrative tension. In "The Equation of Love and Death", Cao Baoping employs this technique with remarkable subtlety, most notably in the nearly two-minute tracking shot where Li Mi chases after Fang Wen following the revelation of the handwriting mismatch. This sequence not only opens a hidden passage into the depths of the character's psyche but also exemplifies the aesthetic and philosophical power of the long take in constructing a "living stream"⁴⁵ of time and experience.

⁴⁵ The term living stream refers to a conceptual framework for representing the continuous flow of life experiences. It usually denotes a chronological "stream" of documents—an electronic analogue of one's memories or personal records—where materials such as CVs and received documents are preserved. In this article, the term more broadly describes a sequence that encompasses varied life circumstances, collectively reflecting the general course of lived experience.



Figure 4.3.6

The scene unfolds as Li Mi races through the densely textured streets of Kunming, her breathless pursuit merging with the pulsating rhythms of urban life (Figure 4.3.6). The camera, maintaining an unbroken gaze, follows her through narrow alleyways lined with cracked walls and discarded objects, where the noise of conversation and the distant hum of traffic create an overwhelming sensory landscape. Each movement—turns, hesitations, and sudden accelerations—unfolds in real time, immersing the audience in a world that feels simultaneously spontaneous and meticulously composed. Through this uninterrupted motion, Cao constructs a visual and emotional continuum—a “living stream”—in which time is not a mechanical sequence of moments but a flowing experience that mirrors Li Mi’s fragmented consciousness. As Turim notes, The long take produces a flowing sense of time, allowing spectators to experience the continuity of life as it unfolds (Turim 1989, 16).

Yet, in this film, temporal flow assumes a deeper psychological resonance. Li Mi’s alternating pace—her abrupt bursts of speed followed by faltering steps—reflects an inner dissonance between desire and despair. The rhythm of her movement becomes a visual metaphor for her temporal dislocation: she is trapped in a cyclical temporality, haunted by the past while unable to grasp the present. Thus, the long take does not merely record the passage of time but embodies the character’s subjective temporality—her anxiety, disorientation, and futile pursuit of emotional closure.

André Bazin’s argument that the long take preserves the integrity of reality by “respecting the spatial and temporal unity of an event” (Bazin 1967, 35) offers a critical foundation for understanding Cao’s method. However, in *The Equation of Love and Death*, Cao transcends Bazin’s notion of cinematic realism. The long take here is not simply an objective representation of real life; rather, it functions as an extension of Li Mi’s consciousness. The camera’s unbroken attention does not situate the audience as detached observers but transforms them into affective participants within Li Mi’s perceptual world. Through this subjective

alignment, the long take undermines the illusion of cinematic completeness—what Bazin referred to as the “myth of the complete film”⁴⁶—by revealing that every “continuous” moment on screen is inherently fragmented, filtered through emotion and perception.

This subversion of objectivity enables the long take to serve as both an aesthetic and epistemological device. As the camera trails Li Mi’s faltering steps, the audience experiences not the mastery of cinematic control but the vulnerability of human perception. The physical exhaustion of the chase merges with emotional fatigue; each breath and stumble becomes an embodied expression of the impossibility of reunion. When Fang Wen finally admits his identity, the long take does not resolve narrative tension but amplifies the tragic irony: Li Mi’s four-year search ends not in closure but in collapse. Her uneven gait and trembling body visually register her internal fragmentation—the death of an illusion and the recognition of irretrievable loss. Through this convergence of motion, temporality, and emotion, the film translates private suffering into a universal meditation on love, memory, and existential disorientation.

From a formal perspective, the sequence also exemplifies Cao’s refined control of light, color, and composition, which elevate the scene from mere documentation to poetic expression. The pale, sun-drenched tones of Kunming create an atmosphere of oppressive heat and emotional aridity. Compositionally, the cinematographer persistently frames Li Mi and Fang Wen within the same shot, even as physical and emotional distance separates them. Meanwhile, Fang Wen’s current girlfriend—present in the diegesis yet visually excluded from the frame—underscores the persistence of Li Mi’s emotional centrality in Fang Wen’s life. This compositional strategy transforms visual framing into narrative commentary: although the lovers cannot reunite within the story, their shared frame fulfills an unspoken emotional wish at the level of cinematic representation. Such aesthetic orchestration not only enriches the film’s expressive depth but also provides spectators with a paradoxical form of consolation—an aesthetic reconciliation amid narrative despair.

Thus, the long take in “The Equation of Love and Death” achieves a delicate balance between realism and subjectivity. It sustains the illusion of continuous time while simultaneously exposing the instability of cinematic reality. Through the dynamic interplay of spatial continuity, emotional immersion, and temporal dislocation, Cao constructs a filmic experience that both affirms and dismantles the “myth of the complete film”. The “living stream” of the long take becomes a philosophical gesture—an attempt to capture life’s fleeting coherence while acknowledging the impossibility of total comprehension. In this way, Cao transforms the long take from a technical device into an aesthetic of uncertainty, where emotion and perception flow together in the fragile current of human existence.

⁴⁶ The concept of the “myth of the complete film” is commonly attributed to French film theorist André Bazin. In his discussion of cinema’s origins and the evolution of its language, Bazin articulated the notion that film aspires toward the total reproduction of reality. He posited that cinema embodies a psychological desire to recreate the external world in its entirety—complete with sound, color, and spatial depth—thus reflecting humanity’s innate impulse to preserve and replicate reality in its most integral form.

4.3.2 The Symbolism of Color and Light: Folds of Memory in a Fading World

In this film, color and light are not merely visual embellishments but serve as crucial symbolic languages that reveal the psychological depth of Li Mi's inner world. Through the delicate orchestration of tone, brightness, and shadow, Cao Baoping transforms the visual surface into an expressive field where memory, emotion, and perception intertwine. The film's muted palette and fluctuating illumination evoke a world gradually dissolving under the weight of time, mirroring Li Mi's fading recollections and emotional disorientation.

Color functions as an emotional index of Li Mi's shifting mental state. The once vivid hues of her memories slowly lose their saturation as the story unfolds, fading into pale and fragmented tones that visualize the erosion of her inner world. These chromatic transitions resemble the creased texture of old photographs, where light has both preserved and worn away the traces of the past (Figure 4.3.7). Light and shadow, meanwhile, introduce a dynamic rhythm of revelation and concealment. The fleeting alternation between brightness and darkness mirrors Li Mi's oscillation between hope and despair, clarity and confusion. In moments when dim light flickers across her face, memory and reality seem to overlap, and those long-buried emotions resurface in fragmented flashes—like folds of paper that can never be fully smoothed.



Figure 4.3.7

Through this intricate interplay of color and light, Cao Baoping constructs a visual metaphor for the fragility of memory and the persistence of loss. The subdued tones and layered shadows not only externalize Li Mi's psychological turmoil but also invite the audience into her fading world, where every glimmer of light seems to echo both remembrance and forgetting. In this way, the film transforms its visual language into a poetic meditation on the passage of time and the emotional folds that remain within it.

Repressive Coding of Low-Saturated Hues⁴⁷: A Visual Narrative Strategy

In “The Equation of Love and Death”, color functions not merely as a visual embellishment but as a crucial semiotic system through which Cao Baoping articulates the film’s emotional and psychological depth. The persistent use of low-saturation, cool tones reshapes Kunming—a city typically characterized by vitality—into what may be described as a “city of discoloration”. This chromatic strategy reinforces the fatalistic atmosphere associated with film noir (Naremore 2008, 21), while simultaneously visualizing the dulling of Li Mi’s perception of reality through desaturated imagery⁴⁸ (Branigan 2006, 87). The following analysis focuses on the low-saturation palette used in the sequence where Li Mi searches for her boyfriend after leaving the police station, examining how color and light function as emotional metaphors and narrative agents.

In this pivotal scene, Li Mi rushes out of the police station after recognizing her boyfriend—now under the pseudonym Ma Bing—only to be denied acknowledgment. As she stumbles through the crowded grey-blue streets, the handheld camera follows her urgent movements. The city is rendered in pale, desaturated tones: buildings cast long, cool shadows, while sunlight glints sharply off cars and bicycle frames. Li Mi, wearing a faded blue shirt and loose jeans, appears fragile and almost weightless (Figure 4.3.8). Her disheveled hair clings to her face as she weaves through the crowd, searching frantically while Officer Ye Qingcheng pursues her. The cool hues and dim shadows merge with her thin figure to create a suffocating visual field, one in which motion paradoxically feels drained of vitality. This chromatic treatment not only amplifies the scene’s visual intensity but also externalizes Li Mi’s inner confusion and exhaustion.



Figure 4.3.8

⁴⁷ The use of low-saturation hues in film and television functions as a visual strategy to evoke a particular emotional atmosphere. By deliberately reducing color intensity, filmmakers construct a subdued and somber visual tone that conveys feelings of heaviness, melancholy, or emotional detachment, thereby reinforcing the thematic depth and psychological undercurrents of the narrative.

⁴⁸ Desaturated imagery refers to the deliberate use of low-saturation colors in film and visual media to convey specific psychological or narrative effects. As Branigan (1992) notes, “Desaturation in the image field often signals a shift toward perceptual blunting, or a character’s emotional withdrawal from reality.” In this sense, the reduction of color intensity functions not only as a stylistic choice but also as a semiotic device, visually encoding characters’ emotional detachment or the dulling of their sensory engagement with the narrative world.

According to the theory of color psychology, cool and dark tones tend to evoke emotions such as melancholy, isolation, and anxiety (Ekman & Friesen 1971, 124–129). In this scene, the interplay between overexposed streets, shadowed architecture, and subdued costuming constructs a visual resonance with Li Mi's emotional state, allowing the audience to perceive her pain viscerally rather than abstractly. This emotional mirroring through color exemplifies the affective reciprocity between image and spectator described in color psychology and cinematic aesthetics.

The film's chromatic design also aligns with the visual conventions of noir cinema, where desaturated hues and diffused lighting cultivate an atmosphere of moral ambiguity and existential despair. As Naremore observes, "film noir thrives on dim light and muted tones that turn the world into a chiaroscuro of fate" (Naremore 2008, 94). In this film, the pervasive use of low-saturation hues generates a similarly fatalistic visual rhythm, resonating with the film's narrative uncertainty and the characters' inescapable despair. Gradually, these hues permeate nearly every scene, forming a coherent visual texture that integrates aesthetic restraint with narrative coherence—a technique deeply explored in narrative theory (Chatman, 1978, 126).

Beyond aesthetic and genre considerations, the film's chromatic strategy functions as a metaphor for Li Mi's psychological numbing. Cognitive psychology suggests that color saturation significantly shapes perception and emotional response to one's environment (Palmer & Rock 1994, 48). The subdued palette in this sequence evokes a sense of visual fatigue, as though Li Mi's long years of waiting and searching have drained color from her world. Her emotional detachment and perceptual dullness are thus mirrored by the film's visual language—a blurring of distinction between the external world and her inner desolation.

Moreover, Cao's use of color subtly reinterprets traditional Chinese aesthetics. In classical Chinese culture, color often carries rich symbolic significance—red for vitality, yellow for nobility, blue for introspection. Yet here, the director deliberately suppresses chromatic vibrancy, rejecting traditional symbolism to foreground psychological realism and existential disquiet. This approach not only subverts conventional visual expectations but also generates a distinctly contemporary cultural texture. As Geertz notes, "culture is not a power, but a context—something within which meaning is produced" (Geertz 1973, 89). Through this lens, the muted color palette becomes a cultural and emotional context, framing Li Mi's private despair within a broader meditation on modern alienation and the fading of affect in urban life.

4.3.3 The Aesthetic Construction of Space through Light and Shadow: Memory, Emotion, and the Politics of Vision

In "The Equation of Love and Death", contrasts of light and shadow constitute one of the film's most expressive visual strategies, shaping not only spatial atmosphere and emotional tone but also the aesthetic construction of cinematic space. Rather than merely serving as a technique for visual contrast, Cao Baoping's manipulation of lighting organizes the viewer's perceptual experience and reveals the psychological and moral landscapes of his characters. Through the

dynamic interplay of illumination and darkness, Cao constructs a layered space in which visibility and concealment, intimacy and estrangement, coexist in perpetual tension.

A striking example occurs in the tunnel sequence, where Li Mi unknowingly drives two drug traffickers through a shifting field of light and darkness. At first, the bright daylight imbues the car with a sense of warmth and normalcy. As the vehicle enters the tunnel, however, the atmosphere abruptly darkens: the sunlight is replaced by intermittent artificial beams that flash across the windshield and passengers' faces (Figure 4.3.9). This rhythmic alternation between light and shadow produces a strong sense of unease, foreshadowing the unfolding danger. Here, the transformation of light also signifies a shift in psychological and moral space. The passage from brightness to obscurity visualizes Li Mi's transition from fleeting optimism to fear and confusion. The interplay between flickering lights and encroaching darkness projects an externalized representation of her internal disorientation. As Bordwell and Thompson note, "high-contrast lighting can sculpt the image space, creating depth and tension that direct the viewer's emotional response" (Bordwell 2010, 183). From a perceptual standpoint, this high-contrast lighting exploits the human visual system's heightened sensitivity to luminance variation, focusing attention on key emotional moments (Ittelson 1992, 56). The glimmers of light reflected across the car's ceiling not only serve as visual focal points but also become fragile metaphors for Li Mi's tenuous hope—tiny illuminations resisting the surrounding darkness. Within this constructed space, light functions both as a physical and emotional architecture, shaping how the viewer experiences proximity, distance, and threat.



Figure 4.3.9

In contrast, Li Mi's birthday sequence unfolds within a soft, amber halo. the tipsy Li Mi staggering around the room on stumbling feet, cigarette held up in her bandaged hand, wide yellow checkered shirt over her body, her hair tied loosely at the back, she holds the microphone drunkenly and sings a sad song, eyes lost in a haze of confusion, her friends spooning in the background at depth of field, the bokeh playing on the tv screen blurred, leaving

only a halo of light (Figure 4.3.10). The golden haze and shallow depth of field blur the boundary between reality and reverie, rendering the moment dreamlike and ephemeral. This aesthetic construction of space through diffused light transforms an ordinary social setting into a psychological landscape of isolation. Despite the warmth of the hue, Li Mi appears emotionally detached—visibly present yet spiritually absent. When the party transitions to a nearby tavern, the ambient light shifts to a saturated golden tone. The flickering string lights at the entrance dissolve into vaporous halos (Figure 4.3.11), visually suggesting the porous border between reality and memory. The aesthetic here resonates with Pierre Nora’s concept of *lieux de mémoire*—“fields of memory”⁴⁹ that serve as repositories of collective and individual remembrance (Nora 1989, 12). The warm, nostalgic light in this sequence functions as a visual *lieu de mémoire*: it preserves Li Mi’s emotional trace of happiness, transmuting private memory into cinematic spatial form. Through this transformation, Cao turns light itself into a medium of remembrance, constructing a space where affect and temporality converge.



Figure 4.3.10



Figure 4.3.11

In contrast, the film’s recurrent use of harsh, high-contrast lighting—particularly in sequences of conflict or pursuit—reflects the oppressive nature of social and psychological environments. These spatial configurations echo Michel Foucault’s understanding of space as a system of visibility through which power operates (Foucault 1977, 170). The harsh light that exposes Li Mi’s vulnerability and fear within enclosed or surveilled spaces transforms cinematic space into a visual metaphor for social constraint. Yet Cao’s images resist total darkness or clarity; instead, they oscillate between the two, visually articulating a tension between oppression and resistance, confinement and the desire for transcendence.

This dialectic reaches a poetic intensity in the black-and-white interview sequence where Li Mi recalls her youthful love with Fang Wen. Standing on an overpass enveloped in fog, she speaks softly into the camera as diffused backlight forms a gentle halo around her figure (Figure 4.3.12). This “halo of memory” recalls Walter Benjamin’s notion of the aura—the unique,

⁴⁹ The Field of Memory (*Les Lieux de Mémoire*) is a concept developed by French historian Pierre Nora to analyze the mechanisms through which collective memory is formed, preserved, and transmitted. It encompasses physical sites, symbols, and rituals that embody shared memories and serve as reference points for collective identity. These “fields” may be material (e.g., archives, monuments, libraries), symbolic (e.g., flags, national anthems, medals), or functional (e.g., commemorations, festivals, public ceremonies). Through the interaction of these dimensions, the Field of Memory operates as the foundation of collective remembrance, shaping historical consciousness and influencing both individual and communal identities.

unrepeatable presence of an original moment (Benjamin 1968, 223). In Cao's hands, the cinematic "aura" becomes a metaphor for the irretrievable past, illuminating the paradox of memory: that it is both a form of preservation and a sign of loss. The aesthetic construction of this space—composed of light haze, diffused illumination, and reflective surfaces—renders the memory simultaneously intimate and distant, material and spectral.



Figure 4.3.12

Thus, the contrast between light and shadow in “The Equation of Love and Death” operates on multiple levels. Aesthetically, it organizes spatial perception and emotional intensity; symbolically, it externalizes the characters’ psychological states; and philosophically, it visualizes the dialectic between memory and oblivion, hope and despair, freedom and constraint. Through this intricate orchestration of illumination, Cao Baoping constructs a cinematic space where visibility becomes emotion, and light becomes the architecture of remembrance.

Through its intricate manipulation of light and shadow, it constructs a multilayered cinematic space where perception, memory, and power intersect. The film transforms visual contrast into a language of emotion and ideology: illuminated surfaces reveal the fragility of human desire, while obscured depths suggest the inescapable weight of social and psychological constraint. Cao Baoping’s aesthetic design of space thus transcends the function of *mise-en-scène*, becoming a means of philosophical inquiry into how visibility structures experience and how cinematic images mediate between inner consciousness and external reality.

This spatial poetics of illumination not only renders Li Mi’s psychological landscape visible but also embodies the broader politics of space in contemporary Chinese urban cinema, where personal trauma is often inscribed in the architecture of light, movement, and confinement. In the following section, I will extend this discussion to explore how the film’s spatial composition—through framing, camera movement, and spatial layering—constructs a

narrative of dislocation and belonging, and how cinematic space becomes a site for negotiating identity, memory, and emotional survival.

4.3.4 The Intertextual Form of Space and Character: Mobile Cage⁵⁰ and Urban Maze

In “The Equation of Love and Death”, Cao Baoping weaves space and character into an intricate narrative fabric where psychological tension and spatial confinement intertwine. The film constructs an intertextual relationship between the individual and the city through two key spatial metaphors—the mobile space of the taxi and the sprawling urban labyrinth⁵¹—forming a paradoxical landscape that is simultaneously enclosed and boundless. The taxi functions not merely as a tool for Li Mi’s survival within the urban bloodstream of Kunming but as a “mobile cage” in which she struggles and searches for truth. This confined space mirrors her fluctuating psychological states and the invisible constraints of her social identity. Each passenger she encounters becomes both a fleeting stranger and a symbolic interlocutor of fate, exposing the tension between emotional isolation and the persistent yearning for connection that defines contemporary urban existence.

The city itself, in contrast, is rendered as a vast, opaque maze, concealing countless untold stories within its dense architecture. Every turn and alleyway through which Li Mi drives is at once a concrete path in her physical search and an abstract trajectory in her emotional and existential journey toward self-redemption. The bustling indifference of the city exterior stands in sharp contrast to the intimate turbulence confined within the taxi, establishing a dialectical spatial structure that oscillates between the external and the internal, the expansive and the claustrophobic. This intertextual relationship between space and character not only intensifies the film’s narrative tension but also transforms the “mobile cage” and the “urban labyrinth” into dual metaphors for human destiny—revealing the fragile balance between freedom and confinement, and inviting the audience to partake in a cinematic pilgrimage of love, loss, and redemption.

Within this spatial dialectic, the taxi becomes what may be termed a mobile private theatre, an arena where Li Mi’s emotional eruptions unfold against the cinematic flow of the city. The paradoxical nature of this space—both public and private—grants it a unique narrative potency. Through the framed composition of the vehicle’s windows, Cao compresses the sprawling cityscape into a mobile backdrop, transforming the world outside into a moving tableau of alienation. The interior, by contrast, becomes an introspective chamber, magnifying Li Mi’s grief, vulnerability, and obsession. When Li Mi tearfully recounts her boyfriend’s letters to strangers, the blurred city beyond the glass loses its sonic and visual dominance, reduced to a

⁵⁰ The term “mobile cage” is adapted from Marc Augé’s (1995) notion of the “non-place” and is used here to describe the paradoxical condition of mobility and confinement in modern urban life. Within this framework, Li Mi’s taxi functions as a micro-space of emotional imprisonment that simultaneously enables and restricts her movement.

⁵¹ The metaphor of the “urban labyrinth” has been widely used in modern cultural theory to describe the complex, disorienting, and psychologically confining structure of metropolitan space. It reflects the individual’s alienation and loss of orientation within capitalist modernity.

-muted projection of her emotional vacuum. The camera lingers on her trembling fingers, furrowed brow, and quivering voice, magnifying the intensity of her inner turmoil. This visual construction captures what Marc Augé defines as the non-place⁵²—a transient site of passage where individuals experience solitude amid movement (Augé 1995, 78). The taxi, thus, becomes both a vessel of mobility and a prison of emotion, encapsulating the paradox of modern urban life.

This sense of spatial dislocation finds visual expression in the scene where Li Mi drives through the rain-soaked streets at night. The raindrops tracing down the windshield merge with the neon reflections outside to form an impressionistic tapestry of light and color. Here, Cao's image composition becomes a visual metaphor for what Zygmunt Bauman terms "fluid modernity"⁵³, characterized by perpetual uncertainty, instability, and motion (Bauman 2000, 2–3). The rain streaks symbolize Li Mi's tears and her unhealed wounds, blurring the contours of the outside world; the neon lights, flickering yet unreachable, embody the seductive illusions of the modern city. Together they articulate the emotional paradox of urban existence—mobility without arrival, longing without fulfillment. The interplay between rain and neon not only heightens the visual rhythm of the film but also externalizes Li Mi's solitude within the turbulent flow of modernity, transforming the taxi into a drifting microcosm of the contemporary soul.

The city of Kunming, as depicted through Cao's lens, evolves into a labyrinthine structure of captivity and desire. Overhead shots reveal an intricate network of overpasses and densely packed silos, resembling what Michel Foucault calls a heterotopia⁵⁴—a space that simultaneously reflects and contests real-world social structures (Foucault 1984, 3–5). These elevated roadways, interwoven like the arteries of the city, symbolize both connection and entrapment. As Li Mi drives ceaselessly through these overpasses, her circular trajectory becomes a metaphor for existential paralysis: every turn brings her closer to the truth yet further from liberation. The overpass, therefore, embodies the intersection between the material and the psychological—the visible geography of the city and the invisible topology of despair.

This Foucauldian heterotopia finds its counterpart in the city's dilapidated silos, whose narrow corridors and damp interiors reflect the social marginalization of those inhabiting the periphery. The silos, serving as Li Mi's dwelling, represent both physical confinement and spiritual impoverishment. Returning there after each day's wandering, Li Mi confronts the silence and alienation that mirror her inner void. According to Michel de Certeau, the "tactics" of everyday urban walkers embody acts of resistance within the structures of imposed order (Certeau 1984, 91–93). Yet, in Li Mi's case, this resistance collapses into futility. Her constant driving—her

⁵² The concept of the "non-place" was introduced by French anthropologist Marc Augé to denote transitory spaces of modernity—such as airports, hotels, and highways—that lack social identity, historical continuity, and emotional attachment.

⁵³ "Fluid modernity" is a term coined by British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman to characterize the instability, mobility, and transience of contemporary social life, in which established structures and certainties are constantly dissolving.

⁵⁴ Michel Foucault's notion of "heterotopia" refers to real spaces that juxtapose multiple incompatible sites, thereby reflecting and inverting the order of the wider society—examples include prisons, cemeteries, and museums.

form of “walking” through the city—is a symbolic gesture of defiance, but the very spatial order of the city neutralizes her agency. The overlapping overpasses and claustrophobic silos transform her movement into circular repetition rather than progress. Each passenger inquiry, each intersection crossed, only reinforces the futility of her search within an urban system that entraps rather than liberates.

Therefore, Li Mi’s emotional breakdown upon discovering Fang Wen’s altered identity marks the collapse of both her personal illusions and her spatial resistance. At this moment, the urban labyrinth ceases to be a site of possibility and becomes a prison of despair. The “strategic resistance”⁵⁵ envisioned by De Certeau (1984) thus fails under the weight of systemic inertia, exposing the individual’s impotence within the labyrinth of modern life. The film’s depiction of this entrapment resonates with Foucault’s conception of space as an instrument of power⁵⁶ and discipline (Foucault 1977, 170–177), wherein individuals internalize the constraints of the environments they inhabit.

Through the intertextual interplay of mobility and immobility, enclosure and expansion, “The Equation of Love and Death” constructs a cinematic topography of modern existence. The “mobile cage” of the taxi and the “urban maze” of Kunming together articulate a spatial poetics of contradiction—freedom sought yet denied, motion enacted yet circumscribed. Cao Baoping transforms everyday urban spaces into metaphors of psychological captivity, allowing the audience to perceive how the aesthetics of cinematic space can materialize emotional struggle and existential isolation. In this sense, Li Mi’s endless driving through the maze-like city becomes not only a narrative device but also a philosophical meditation on the condition of being—where love, memory, and despair coexist within the same confined yet infinite cinematic space.

In the concrete and steel jungles of contemporary urban life, individuals are often pushed to the margins by invisible structures of power and capital, becoming drifting and solitary beings caught between mobility and isolation. “The Equation of Love and Death” reveals this urban landscape of loneliness and alienation within the broader context of globalization. The “non-spaces” that appear throughout the film—such as petrol stations and telephone booths—are not merely physical settings, but powerful visual metaphors for emotional detachment and existential dislocation. They embody what Marc Augé terms “non-space”, those transient, standardized, and dehumanized environments that erase individuality and historical depth. Within these spaces, Li Mi’s relentless search for her missing lover becomes not only a narrative of personal longing but also an allegory for the alienated condition of modern urban existence. Through the fateful trajectories of Li Mi and the other characters, Cao Baoping exposes both the insignificance of the individual within the machinery of globalization and the persistent human yearning for identity and emotional belonging in an indifferent world.

⁵⁵ The expression “strategic resistance” derives from Michel de Certeau’s analysis of everyday practices, denoting the subtle, often unconscious tactics by which individuals resist institutional power through ordinary spatial behaviors such as walking or speaking.

⁵⁶ According to Michel Foucault’s spatial theory, space is not a neutral container but a disciplinary mechanism through which power is exercised and social behavior is regulated.

The petrol station sequence powerfully exemplifies the confrontation between the individual and the impersonal “non-space.” According to Augé, non-space refers to “a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity” (Augé 1995, 78). In the film, the petrol station functions as a prototypical instance of such space—a sterile environment illuminated by harsh fluorescent lights, marked by standardized signage, and stripped of human warmth. Within this artificial setting, Li Mi’s confrontation with the two drug traffickers, Qiu Huogui and Qiu Shuitian, unfolds with striking symbolic force. The scene’s oppressive lighting and geometric spatial composition heighten the sense of disconnection: every element of the *mise-en-scène* seems to resist human emotion. When Li Mi, small and trembling, faces her adversaries under the glaring lights, she is no longer confronting mere criminals, but the faceless mechanisms of a de-territorialized and commercialized urban world. Her desperate attempt to reclaim love and meaning through her search for Fang Wen collapses against this cold backdrop. The echo of her cries in the hollow petrol station signifies the futility of communication in the non-space, where her pleas for help dissipate into an atmosphere devoid of empathy. This encounter thus becomes both a microcosm of the alienating logic of globalization and a metaphor for the existential solitude of modern life.

Similarly, the telephone booth—another recurring “non-space” in the film—reveals the paradox of intimacy and isolation in the age of mechanical communication. The booth’s narrow, transparent enclosure offers temporary refuge from the bustling streets, yet it simultaneously amplifies the character’s loneliness. When Li Mi repeatedly dials Fang Wen’s number inside the booth, the camera lingers on her anxious gestures and vacant gaze, while the muffled noise of the city filters faintly through the glass. This claustrophobic environment, lit by the dim glow of the streetlamps, serves as both a physical and psychological enclosure: a fragile shell in which Li Mi’s hope oscillates between fragile expectation and inevitable despair. Each unanswered call becomes an echo of her inner void—a ritual of yearning that only deepens her isolation. As Augé suggests, non-spaces are “inward-looking, sealed worlds” that erase social interaction and history (Augé 1995, 82). In this sense, the telephone booth functions as a vessel of psychological exile, reflecting the disconnection and existential fatigue of individuals adrift in globalized cities.

Through the cinematic juxtaposition of petrol stations and telephone booths, Cao Baoping constructs a visual and emotional cartography of alienation. Both spaces embody what Bauman calls “fluid modernity”, a social condition characterized by perpetual movement, uncertainty, and loss of stable identity. In this fluid modern world, relationships and emotions, like the city’s lights and reflections, appear fleeting and dissolvable. Li Mi’s solitary wandering through Kunming—working as a taxi driver, navigating anonymous streets, endlessly searching for a man who has already disappeared—becomes a metaphor for the displaced subject of global modernity. Her taxi, which traverses the city’s arteries, offers her mobility yet no sense of arrival; it is a “mobile non-space,” where the illusion of motion conceals a deeper stasis.

The film’s depiction of other characters further reinforces this sense of entrapment in non-space. Fang Wen’s descent into drug trafficking to escape poverty, the Qiu brothers’ moral

compromise under economic pressure, and Officer Ye Qingcheng's emotional collapse following his wife's betrayal all manifest different dimensions of alienation within the commodified city. Each character attempts to locate meaning or stability, yet their efforts only entangle them deeper within the invisible web of social and psychological constraints. Their lives intersect briefly, only to drift apart again—like vehicles crossing paths at a highway interchange, leaving behind transient traces that vanish into the void of urban night.

In this regard, “The Equation of Love and Death” resonates with Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia—spaces that juxtapose incompatible realities and expose the contradictions of modern existence. The film's non-spaces are heterotopic precisely because they mirror the real world while simultaneously negating it: they are both real and unreal, concrete and symbolic. Through these spatial metaphors, Cao Baoping visualizes the psychic geography of contemporary China, where the promises of modernization coexist with profound emotional emptiness.

Eventually, Li Mi's story extends beyond the boundaries of personal tragedy to articulate a collective condition of urban solitude. Her endless search for Fang Wen becomes an allegory for the modern individual's futile pursuit of meaning amid the impersonal machinery of global capitalism. In the film's visual language, every petrol station, telephone booth, and rain-smeared windshield becomes a *lieu de mémoire*—a “Field of Memory” that preserves fragments of longing, despair, and fleeting tenderness within the cold circuitry of the city. Through these non-spaces, Cao Baoping not only maps the architecture of alienation but also invites reflection on the fragile humanity that persists, however faintly, within it.

4.4 The Narrative Functions of Sound and Dialogue

In “The Equation of Love and Death”, sound and language operate not merely as auxiliary tools for plot progression, but as integral narrative devices that shape emotion, reveal psychology, and articulate the film's underlying themes. Cao Baoping's precise control over auditory detail transforms sound into a vital expressive medium—one that interacts dynamically with the image to construct a world that oscillates between realism and imagination.

This section explores the film's soundscape through three interrelated dimensions: dialogue, environmental sound, and silence. The film's dialogues, marked by their restraint and emotional resonance, not only advance the narrative but also uncover the characters' inner contradictions, desires, and vulnerabilities. Through these verbal exchanges, the audience gains access to the subtle psychological textures that define the characters' motivations and fates. Meanwhile, the film's environmental sounds—whether the incessant noise of urban traffic, the sudden downpour against the taxi's windshield, or the subdued hum of a lonely night—envelop the viewer in a dense acoustic atmosphere, amplifying the tension between isolation and connection.

Equally significant is the strategic use of silence. In Cao's cinematic language, silence is not an absence of sound but a charged expressive field that contains latent emotion and psychological pressure. These quiet intervals allow the audience to sense the unspoken turmoil of the characters and to perceive how emotional intensity often reaches its peak in moments of stillness. In this way, silence becomes more powerful than sound itself, embodying the film's emotional core and deepening its poetic resonance.

4.4.1 Li Mi's Linguistic Style: From Fragmentation to Poetic Expression

The most immediate manifestation of Li Mi's linguistic style in the film's opening sequence lies in her fragmented utterances and mechanical repetitions. Inside the taxi, she incessantly recites strings of seemingly meaningless numbers to her passengers:

“9, 36, 52, 69, 80, 83, 103, 193, 193, 103, 193...
Do you know what do I want to do the most?
What I want the most is to find him...
Then shout at him-
Why the fuck you not just go to hell!”

This repetitive enumeration constructs an atmosphere of tension and anxiety while revealing Li Mi's obsessive persistence and emotional restlessness. The rhythmic recitation of numbers, ritualistic in its cadence, becomes both her desperate attempt to maintain order and her unconscious response to a collapsing world. Her speech is frequently interrupted by shifts in tone—moments where hesitation, trembling, and fury intertwine. These breaks are not mere pauses in syntax but ruptures in affect, revealing the fissures of her psyche and the instability of her emotional world. Her complaints appear contradictory: she resents the torment of the unanswered letters, yet fears losing all connection to Fang Wen. The disjointed rhythm of her words thus visualizes her inner fragmentation, echoing a consciousness perpetually on the verge of collapse.

Lacan's concept of semiotic rupture⁵⁷ in his “Mirror Stage”⁵⁸ theory illuminates this linguistic disintegration. As Lacan argues, language functions as both a means of self-recognition and a structural limitation—while it mediates human cognition, it simultaneously distances the subject from the immediacy of desire (Lacan 1977, 86). Li Mi's fragmented speech vividly embodies this paradox. Her repetitions, incoherent syntax, and numeric incantations signify not an absence of meaning but a crisis of expression—language here becomes the site of

⁵⁷ Although Lacan himself never used the term semiotic rupture, it has been adopted by later psychoanalytic theorists to describe the instability and disjunction between the signifier and the subject's unconscious desire within the symbolic order. It highlights how linguistic fragmentation reflects emotional repression and the failure of language to fully articulate affect.

⁵⁸ In *Écrits* (1977), Lacan defines the mirror stage as the formative moment when the infant identifies with its reflected image, producing an illusory sense of unity and the emergence of the ego. This stage marks the subject's entry into the symbolic order of language, accompanied by a permanent gap between the self and its representation.

repression. Trapped within the symbolic order⁵⁹, she struggles to articulate what lies beyond it: the pure effect of loss, longing, and despair. Her mechanical language mirrors her futile attempts to stabilize meaning in an emotionally chaotic reality. As Lacan suggests, “desire speaks only through lack” (Lacan 1977, 92); Li Mi’s fragmented speech thus becomes the echo of her unfulfilled yearning, the residue of a desire that language can never fully enclose.

As the narrative unfolds and Li Mi gradually confronts the truth of Fang Wen’s death, her linguistic form undergoes a profound transformation—from fragmented murmurs to poetic serenity. In the final scene, facing the camera, she recounts her love story with quiet composure: “We were both unremarkable... Under the bright sun, he cried for the first time...” Her speech, once broken and anxious, now flows with lyrical cadence. The words are no longer the fragmented remains of despair but the distilled essence of remembrance. This transformation signifies emotional sublimation and self-reconstruction. Through poetic language, Li Mi transcends the constraints of the symbolic and approaches an authentic emotional articulation. The poetry of her voice becomes an act of self-redemption—a reconciliation with the past and an affirmation of her renewed identity.

Language in “The Equation of Love and Death” thus functions as both a bridge and a barrier between the self and the world. Throughout the film, Li Mi’s speech oscillates between coherence and rupture, hope and disillusionment. As a taxi driver, she traverses the nocturnal city, murmuring sequences of numbers, repeatedly asking strangers if they have seen Fang Wen. These repetitions represent her linguistic attempt to hypothesize, to reconstruct meaning from uncertainty. Her assumption that “something must have happened in the past three months” becomes both an expression of her anxiety and a manifestation of her obsessive search for closure. Yet her assumptions collapse as reality exceeds her linguistic constructs.

This linguistic uncertainty can be better understood through Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1981) concept of “dialogism”⁶⁰, which emphasizes that language is inherently relational and polyphonic, always containing multiple voices and intentions (Bakhtin 1981, 293). In Li Mi’s dialogues with the drug traffickers, language becomes unstable, filled with ambiguity and indirectness. The traffickers’ evasive answers and Li Mi’s anxious inquiries create a web of uncertain meanings. This polysemy—where words carry contradictory resonances depending on who speaks—renders truth fluid and elusive. The dialogic interplay of conflicting discourses not only heightens the film’s suspense but also reflects the instability of communication in a world fragmented by mistrust and emotional alienation.

However, language in the film does not merely express; it also exerts power and violence. The verbal aggression between characters exposes the coercive potential of words. When Qiu

⁵⁹ The symbolic order, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, refers to the domain of language, law, and social convention through which human subjectivity is structured. It mediates desire and identity, but also limits expression, as every utterance is already governed by the rules of signification.

⁶⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism (1981) suggests that all language is inherently dialogic, existing in continuous interaction with prior and future utterances. Meaning, therefore, is never singular but generated through a multiplicity of voices, perspectives, and contexts within discourse.

Huogui threatens Li Mi—"I beat up the little bastard who drew lots of blood; I'll overthrow him with one slap"—language becomes a performative act of intimidation. Similarly, the police officer Ye Qingcheng's calculated tone—"This lying is just a trick... Nothing personal with me"—reveals another form of linguistic violence, the cold exercise of institutional power. Foucault's (1978) theory of "discursive power"⁶¹ elucidates this dynamic: language operates as a medium through which power circulates and disciplines (Foucault 1978, 101). Within this film, words are not passive carriers of meaning but active instruments of control, manipulation, and resistance. From the lies embedded in Fang Wen's letters to the police's verbal coercion, linguistic violence structures the very fabric of the narrative.

Finally, the film's exploration of Li Mi's language illuminates the tension between reality and illusion, truth and imagination. Each character constructs his or her own "truth" through speech, yet these truths continually conflict, generating the film's emotional and narrative complexity. Through its fragmented yet poetic language, "The Equation of Love and Death" captures the fragile human attempt to speak amid chaos—to find coherence within disintegration, and meaning within loss.

4.4.2 The Poetics of Sound: Ambient and Subjective Acoustics as Emotional Cartography

If cinema is a tapestry woven with light and shadow, then sound is the invisible thread that binds its emotional texture. In "The Equation of Love and Death", Cao Baoping transforms ambient and subjective sound⁶² into vital narrative forces that shape both the film's psychological landscape and its existential undertones. From the restless traffic of Kunming's city center to the distant hum of wind in desolate alleys, every auditory element becomes a form of emotional cartography, tracing Li Mi's inner turbulence while reflecting the broader alienation of modern urban life. Sound in this film is not mere background; it is a catalyst of emotion, a narrative current that carries the viewer between the realms of realism and reverie.

Beneath the surface of urban life, noise emerges as both a by-product of modernization and an intrusive aural symbol of anxiety. Through intricate sound design, Cao constructs an acoustic architecture in which the din of car horns, construction machinery, and human chatter merges into a dense soundscape⁶³ that mirrors the disorientation of modern existence. The streets of Kunming at dusk become a resonant network of neon and sound—Li Mi's taxi cuts through this auditory ocean like a glimmering fish swimming against the current. The car's engine hums like a heartbeat of exhaustion, while the hiss of tires on asphalt forms delicate rhythmic threads

⁶¹ Foucault's concept of discursive power (1978) in *The History of Sexuality* refers to the way power circulates through discourse, shaping what can be said, known, and perceived as truth. Rather than merely repressing individuals, discourse produces subjects, identities, and regimes of knowledge.

⁶² A sound design technique that represents a character's internal perception rather than the objective reality of the scene. This can include amplified bodily sounds, tinnitus, or distorted hearing to reflect mental or emotional states.

⁶³ A term coined by Canadian composer and sound theorist R. Murray Schafer to describe the total acoustic environment perceived by humans. It includes all the sounds of a given environment, whether natural, human, or technological, and explores how these sounds shape our spatial and cultural awareness.

stitching fragments of time together. Even the distant clang of a pile driver sounds like a subterranean pulse, an echo of buried human desire.

As Li Mi drives through Nanping Street, the sounds of the city—the clicking of high heels, the buzz of mobile phones, the shouts of street vendors—interweave to form a dense sonic texture. This auditory collage corresponds precisely to what R. Murray Schafer terms a soundscape, consisting of “keynotes, signals, and soundmarks” that collectively shape the listener’s perception of place (Schafer 1977, 45). In Cao’s film, this soundscape does not merely depict space—it performs it. Through sound, Kunming becomes a living organism whose chaotic pulse embodies the psychological fragmentation of its inhabitants.

Within this enveloping sound, Li Mi’s presence appears both immersed and detached. Her taxi is a mobile acoustic capsule—simultaneously surrounded by noise yet sealed within silence. When she is abducted and desperately shouts for help toward a passing truck, the deafening pop music from its speakers overwhelms her voice. Her cry merges into the mechanical rhythm, symbolizing the annihilation of individual subjectivity in the modern acoustic field. As Schafer observes, noise pollution represents not only “a deterioration of the acoustic environment” but also “an alienation of the human spirit” (Schafer 1977, 123). In this moment, Li Mi’s drowned voice becomes an emblem of existential isolation: the louder the external world becomes, the more profound her inner silence grows.

The confrontation scene between Li Mi and Fang Wen—after she discovers his hidden identity—reveals Cao’s masterful control of auditory emotion. As Li Mi recites the words of Fang Wen’s letter, the ambient noise of the street slowly recedes until only her trembling voice remains, each syllable cutting through the stillness like a wound. When Fang Wen finally confesses his loss of love, silence engulfs the frame. It is not the absence of sound but a moment of suspended time—an acoustic heartbeat halting in unison with emotional collapse. This compositional strategy echoes Michel Chion’s theory of “audio spatial stratification”⁶⁴, wherein the layering and modulation of sound construct psychological depth (Chion 1994, 67). The gradual reintroduction of street noises and distant murmurs after the confession externalizes the disintegration of intimacy: as the world’s sound returns, emotional proximity vanishes. Here, silence becomes the ultimate metaphor of distance—its stillness is more eloquent than any dialogue.

At the film’s conclusion, when Li Mi receives the relic left by Fang Wen at the police station, all environmental sounds abruptly vanish. This silence, following the film’s earlier saturation with urban noise, achieves an almost metaphysical intensity. It becomes, in Walter Benjamin’s sense, the “momentary crystallization of all accumulated sounds” (Benjamin 1999, 172). Silence here is not the end of narration but its emotional crescendo—an acoustic epiphany that transforms despair into transcendence. In Cao’s poetics of sound, noise and silence exist in

⁶⁴ A concept proposed by French film theorist Michel Chion. It refers to the multi-layered organization of sound within cinematic space, where variations in volume, timbre, and position create psychological depth and guide emotional perception.

dialectical tension: noise dismantles the illusion of order, while silence restores meaning through absence.

The same dialectic continues in the film's subjective sound design. Before Fang Wen's fatal encounter with the drug traffickers, the ticking clock in his car grows unnaturally loud, creating what Rick Altman calls an "acoustic mapping of psychological reality" (Altman 1992, 143). The amplified ticking becomes the aural embodiment of time anxiety, foreshadowing his impending doom. When the crash occurs, the violent collision abruptly gives way to tinnitus—a piercing high-frequency ring representing what Altman describes as "the violent metaphor of sensory memory" (Altman 1999, 207). This sound marks the rupture between physical experience and psychological awareness, converting trauma into pure acoustic sensation.

As Fang Wen gasps for breath after the crash, his wheezing becomes increasingly distorted, shifting from a physiological sound to what Altman terms "the acoustic evidence of psychic reconfiguration" (Altman 2001, 89). Each irregular breath resonates like the shattering of consciousness, transforming the subjective soundscape into an audible map of trauma. Together, the ticking clock, tinnitus, and gasping breath form what may be called a traumatic trilogy of sound⁶⁵ from temporal anxiety, to sensory violence, to the collapse of cognition. These auditory symbols pierce through visual realism and grant the audience direct access to the character's inner disintegration.

Through the interplay of ambient and subjective acoustics, "The Equation of Love and Death" constructs an auditory poetics that transcends representation. The film turns noise into emotion, silence into revelation, and sound into the very architecture of human fragility. It is through this complex acoustic layering that Cao Baoping allows his audience not only to witness the characters' suffering but to hear their despair, transforming sound into the truest expression of existence.

4.4.3 Resonant Fractures: The Decomposition of Sound and the Disintegration of Reality

As Fang Wen's body pierces through the twilight and collapses onto Li Mi's taxi, "The Equation of Love and Death" reaches its most violent convergence of sound and image—a moment where auditory chaos becomes a psychological autopsy. Altman, in *The Silent Language*, defines subjective sound as "an acoustic metonymy of psychological violence" (Altman 1992, 172). In Cao Baoping's sound design, this principle is materialized through a sequence that deconstructs and reorganizes sonic elements to render Li Mi's cognitive breakdown as an audible trauma field.

⁶⁵ A descriptive term used here to denote the progressive use of three sound motifs (clock ticking, tinnitus, and wheezing) in *The Equation of Love and Death*. Each corresponds to a different stage of psychological collapse—temporal anxiety, sensory trauma, and cognitive disintegration.

The muffled thud of the body striking the car roof first punctures the soundscape—a low-frequency reverberation of metallic distortion that releases a surge of acoustic violence. Altman refers to this as “the acoustic signature of the flesh” (Altman 1999, 198), in which physical pain is transfigured into a sonic instrument of psychological deterrence. Immediately after, the piercing crack of shattering glass slices through the auditory space, dynamically compressed into a shrill burst that replicates the neurological fragmentation of traumatic memory—mirroring Li Mi’s disintegrating perception of self.

Her subsequent scream, primal and unrestrained, forms a chaotic waveform whose pitch leaps erratically across octaves. This “violent deconstruction of emotion,” as Altman describes it (Altman 2001, 97), exposes the collapse of psychological defense mechanisms through the physical extremities of the voice. When the sound abruptly withdraws into six seconds of total silence, the result is a cognitive vacuum—a cinematic analogue of dissociative shock.

Then, a lyrical piano theme quietly intrudes upon the silence, overlaid like a ghost over the scene’s violent acoustic residue. Its warm timbre, modulated through subtle equalization, creates what Altman terms a “double exposure of psychological reality” (Altman 1992, 156): the tender melody becomes a morbid projection of Li Mi’s denial, the music serving as the acoustic evidence of her cognitive dissonance.

The soundscape further evolves into an eerie audiovisual detachment. Police officers rush toward the scene, yet their footsteps and muted voices occur in visual silence—a sonic ellipsis reminiscent of Bazin’s notion of “progressive detachment from reality”, where realism gives way to perceptual estrangement. This acoustic stripping reinforces Li Mi’s total sensory disorientation. Over the fifty-second span of this sequence, sound transforms into metaphor: the thud signifies the index of corporeal violence; the shattering glass mirrors the fragmentation of memory; the scream embodies the collapse of psychological defense; the silence evokes cognitive death; and the piano motif emerges as pathological compensation for psychic disorder. Through this intricate layering of sound, Cao Baoping transforms auditory perception into a narrative witness to trauma, proving that sound, when fragmented and reassembled, can reveal the unspeakable fractures of consciousness.

With its distinctive visual aesthetics and narrative strategy, “The Equation of Love and Death” constructs a complex universe where reality and illusion constantly intertwine, establishing a paradigmatic example of Cao Baoping’s cinematic language. Across this study—from narrative construction to image poetics and sound design—the film reveals multiple dimensions of psychological and spatial tension. Its non-linear narrative and interplay between fantasy and realism subvert the conventions of the crime genre, compelling the viewer to reconstruct meaning through perceptual participation and interpretive reconstruction. This approach resonates with Deleuze’s *Time-Image theory* (Deleuze 1985, 42), foregrounding the openness and multiplicity of cinematic temporality.

Visually, Cao’s aesthetics are grounded in realism yet enriched by surrealist tendencies. The use of handheld cinematography and intimate close-ups intensifies the documentary texture

and externalizes the characters' emotional fragility. The symbolic use of light and color deepens thematic expression: muted tones and dim lighting convey the oppressive ambience of the modern city, while the contrasts between cold and warm hues delineate the fragile boundaries between reality and fantasy. Through this chromatic stratification, the film visually encodes psychological transformation and spatial instability.

Sonically, the film achieves what might be termed a poetics of sound. Language, environment, and silence coalesce into emotional and psychological architecture. Li Mi's shifting linguistic rhythm—from fragmented anxiety to poetic despair—mirrors her descent into trauma. Ambient sounds create the texture of realism while subtly mirroring inner turbulence; silence, conversely, becomes an expressive agent of existential tension, embodying what Benjamin calls "the solidification of all sounds" (Benjamin 1999, 172).

Ultimately, the film transcends its narrative of crime and love to reveal the ontological fragility of human experience in an urbanized world. Cao Baoping's meticulous sound and image design translate trauma, longing, and dislocation into sensorial metaphors. The film thus offers not only an aesthetic achievement but also a philosophical reflection on perception, memory, and modern alienation.

Future research may extend this discussion by integrating reception theory and intercultural analysis, examining how Chinese urban cinema engages global sound aesthetics in the age of digital mediation. In this resonance between sound and silence, between fragmentation and reconstruction, Cao's cinema finds its ultimate language—a language not of words, but of echoes.

Chapter 5 Silent Scream and Raucouc Solitude: Sound Design and Spatial Metaphors in “Einstein and Einstein” 狗十三 (2013)

5.1 Introduction

Scenario

The story takes place in an ordinary middle-class family in Xi'an, where Li Wan 李玩, a 13-year-old junior high school student, lives with her grandparents. Her father has remarried and formed a new family with her stepmother and she is about to welcome her half-brother. Li Wan's biological mother has reorganized her family and virtually disappeared from her life. On her 13th birthday, her father makes up for his long absence by giving her a golden retriever, which she named “Einstein” about her interest in physics. However, when the dog accidentally went missing, Li Wan began searching, skipping school and staying out at night. Her family thinks she “doesn't know what she's doing”, and her stepmother tries to calm the conflict by buying a new dog with a similar appearance and forcing her to accept it as the original “Einstein”.

Li Wan refuses to recognize the new dog and insists on finding the lost Einstein. Her defiance triggers family conflict: her grandmother is anxious that she is interfering with her studies, her stepmother thinks she is “acting up”, and her father tries to use his authority to suppress her emotions. In a scene that epitomizes domestic violence, her father pushes her head into the bathtub and forces her to apologize to her stepmother. Meanwhile, Li Wan faces pressure at school. Her physics teacher encourages her to participate in a competition, but her father, believing it to be a “distraction”, forces her to quit the hobby group. While she appears to be compliant, she shows her stubbornness by studying physics formulas late at night with a desk lamp.

After her stepmother gives birth to her younger brother Zhaozhao 昭昭, the focus of the family shifts completely. Li Wan is asked to take care of her brother and even performs at birthday parties to set the mood. She gradually learns to hide her true emotions: pretending to like wine at dinner parties, showing her sisterly attitude towards her brother, and using lies to maintain the apparent harmony of the family. When she wins a physics competition, her father sees it as a “success” for the family, but Li Wan's blank gaze on the podium implies that she has lost the pure pursuit of achievement.

Li Wan finally accepts the second dog as “Einstein”, symbolizing her surrender to reality. She begins to live by the rules that govern the adult world: acting out her love for her brother in front of her father, playing the role of a good student in front of the teachers, and even asking for details about the feeding of her brother. Later, when Li Wan comes across the lost Einstein on the street, she stops and stares at the dog being dragged by the motorbike driver, and turns away. The camera focuses on the moment when the dog's collar comes off, suggesting that although she recognizes the truth, she has lost the courage to break free. At a planetarium late

at night, Li Wan uses a physical formula to calculate the possibility of escaping from the solar system but gets no answer. The film ends with her attending her brother's birthday party. Li Wan cooperates mechanically with the photographs, her eyes numb. As the family sits around to celebrate, the camera slowly pulls back to reveal a starry night sky outside the window.

As one of the most distinctive contemporary Chinese filmmakers from The Sixth-Generation, Cao Baoping is recognized for his synthesis of social realism⁶⁶ and psychological drama⁶⁷. His works explore moral ambiguity, emotional restraint, and the tension between individual desire and collective discipline. Within China's post-2000 cinematic landscape, often defined by what Zhang (2016) terms "new urban realism"⁶⁸—a style focusing on the ordinary lives and repressed emotions of citizens in transitional society—Cao's films stand out for their sharp depiction of marginalized individuals and their struggle within hierarchical family and social systems.

Among his works, "Einstein and Einstein" serves as a poignant reflection on adolescence, domestic violence, and social conformity. The film follows Li Wan, navigating an environment of emotional neglect and patriarchal control. Unlike conventional "painful youth" films⁶⁹ that sentimentalize growth, Cao presents youth through a detached and almost clinical lens. His aesthetic approach—especially through sound design and spatial composition—translates Li Wan's inner silence and resistance into perceptible sensory forms. The film's strategic alternation between acoustic voids and ambient noise, and its contrast between closed domestic interiors and open yet alienating urban spaces, constructs an emotional geography⁷⁰ that mirrors Li Wan's psychological confinement.

Before applying theoretical frameworks, it is important to observe how "Einstein and Einstein" employs sound and space to communicate meaning. The film's use of silence operates not as absence, but as a deliberate narrative force—a pause that magnifies Li Wan's suppressed voice. In several key scenes, silence displaces dialogue, compelling viewers to "hear" the emotional vacuum between family members. Conversely, clamorous environments—school corridors, public gatherings, or the barking of her dog—form sonic metaphors of external pressure and social noise. Spatially, the domestic interior is filmed with narrow frames and muted tones, symbolizing enclosure and control, while the urban exterior expands yet remains emotionally

⁶⁶ Social realism in Chinese cinema refers to a mode of filmmaking rooted in depicting everyday life and social reality, often emphasizing the moral and psychological conflicts of ordinary individuals under societal transition.

⁶⁷ Psychological drama denotes a narrative style focusing on the inner emotions and conflicts of characters rather than external events.

⁶⁸ New urban realism is a post-2000 Chinese cinematic trend characterized by naturalistic representation of urban youth, family tension, and moral disillusionment (Zhang, 2016).

⁶⁹ Painful youth film are a popular genre in early 2000s Chinese cinema portraying adolescence through melodrama and sentimental suffering.

⁷⁰ The concept of emotional geography describes how spatial arrangements reflect emotional states and social structures.

barren, creating what Lefebvre calls “socially produced space”⁷¹(Lefebvre 1991, 39) —a site where power is inscribed into everyday environments.

To analyze these aesthetic dimensions, this chapter employs an interdisciplinary framework combining sound theory, spatial theory, and feminist film analysis. In sound design analysis, Michel Chion’s concept of sound hierarchy and acousmatic sound (Chion 1994, 25–32), along with Rick Altman’s theory of sound space⁷² (Altman 1992, 18–20), will be used to interpret how Cao constructs emotional distance through sonic contrasts between silence and cacophony. These theories allow for understanding how sound assumes independent narrative functions rather than serving merely as accompaniment.

In terms of spatial metaphor, the analysis draws on Henri Lefebvre’s Spatial Triad—comprising physical, social, and mental space (Lefebvre 1991, 38)—and Edward Soja’s notion of Thirdspace⁷³, which merges material and psychological dimensions of lived experience (Soja 1996, 68). Through this framework, the film’s domestic and urban settings are examined as layered metaphors revealing gendered power structures and emotional isolation within Chinese society.

From a feminist perspective, Laura Mulvey’s (1975) “Male Gaze” and Judith Butler’s (1990) Theory of Gender Performativity will inform the discussion of Li Wan’s silencing within patriarchal space. Li Wan’s muteness can be read as both submission and subtle defiance—her silence resists being fully inscribed into the structures that oppress her. Through the interplay of sound and space, “Einstein and Einstein” transforms private suffering into aesthetic expression, articulating the invisible mechanisms of control that shape gender and voice in contemporary Chinese families.

The aim of this chapter is not to evaluate prior research, but to extend film scholarship by foregrounding how audiovisual aesthetics—specifically sound design and spatial construction—function as narrative and emotional devices. By situating this film within both Chinese realist cinema and global sound-space theory, this study seeks to illuminate how Cao Baoping transforms silence and space into metaphors of modern subjectivity.

5.2 Sound Design: Silent Scream

In the soundscape of “Einstein and Einstein”, silence functions not as the mere absence of sound but as a coded articulation of resistance and repression. As Michel Chion observes, silence in film “is never truly empty; it always signifies” (Chion 1994, 57). Within Cao Baoping’s acoustic design, silence becomes a wordless confrontation, a form of muted rebellion within the domestic power grid. The film’s aural texture dissects the moral decay of

⁷¹ Lefebvre’s notion of socially produced space conceptualizes spatial forms as manifestations of power, ideology, and social relations.

⁷² Altman’s sound space framework emphasizes the spatial organization of sound within film, linking aural perspective with emotional realism.

⁷³ Soja’s Thirdspace integrates the physical (real), mental (imagined), and lived (experienced) spaces to reveal socio-psychological complexity.

the family with what might be called an acoustic scalpel, transforming absence into the most potent cinematic language of pain.

The film constructs what Rick Altman calls a “power space of sound” (Altman 1992, 27), in which sound and silence delineate social hierarchies and emotional submission. Across the narrative, silence is layered in three distinct dimensions. First, it marks the trace of discipline—Li Wan’s father’s constant injunction to “be sensible” (要懂事) operates as a silencing mechanism that folds her voice inward, converting rebellion into internalized muteness. Second, the acoustic struggle of power manifests in social micro-spaces—the dining table, the classroom, and the living room—where parental admonitions masquerade as moral education but in fact constitute what Foucault calls “micro-physics of power” (Foucault 1977, 138), a subtle violence embedded in everyday speech. Third, the most poetic form of resistance resides in the deliberately attenuated sound effects—the hollow echo of the lost dog Einstein, or the muffled sobs in the bathroom at night—which resonate as ghostly traces of erased innocence, akin to scratches on a vinyl record whose melody has been silenced.

These scenes, though briefly referenced here, will be explored in detail in the subsequent subsections of this chapter. Each instance—the dining room dialogue, the classroom reprimand, and the nocturnal silence of the bathroom—demonstrates how Cao constructs a layered soundscape where silence speaks. By examining these case studies through Chion’s hierarchy of sound and Altman’s theory of spatialized sound, this section will investigate how acoustic control and its rupture externalize Li Wan’s psychological entrapment and fragile resistance. Thus, this introduction serves not as a conclusion but as an entry point into the anatomy of silence—the sonic structure through which the film articulates both domination and defiance.

5.2.1 The Multiple Meanings of Silence

Silence in this film is forged as a sharp narrative dagger, not only cutting through the reefs of the characters’ souls, but also piercing through the hypocritical curtains of family ethics, and bursting with dazzling sharpness in the sound effects. The rustling of the father’s “red trial” builds up an auditory hegemony, the teacher’s admonition weaves a prison of discipline, while Li Wan’s muffled cries crystallize into symbols of defiance in the silence. When the sound of ice melting in the parallel universe penetrates the fence of reality, and when the sobs in the bathroom are transformed into echoes of broken souls, the silence is sublimated from an instrument of oppression to a poetic resistance. The dialectic of this sound effect, with the blank knocking on the audience’s eardrums, lets the unspoken truth explode in the abyss of silence, completing the most poignant denunciation of violence in education.

In the film, when her grandfather loses Li Wan’s dog, she is determined to find it, but the family is thrown into turmoil because of her emotional breakdown. In such a situation, the father attempts to suppress his daughter through patriarchal power, and the relationship between sound and picture in this scene constitutes a set of subtle allegories of power. When the father reprimands Li Wan for Einstein’s disappearance, the camera frames the confrontation in a symmetrical composition (Figure 5.2.1): the father sits in the middle of the sofa, all the other

family members are sitting together; Li Wan huddles in the shadows in the lower left corner of the frame, standing and facing them all alone. This oppressive image is transformed by the director into a dynamic battlefield of sound effects, in which the layers of sound are carefully choreographed, as Foucault put it, the “micro-physics” (Foucault 1977, 26) of power in the auditory dimension.



Figure 5.2.1

From 51:20 to 58:58 in the film, when the father asks, “How long are you going to make trouble?”, the soundtrack is suddenly withdrawn, the hum of the air-conditioning and the white noise of the traffic outside the window fade away, leaving the soundstage deliberately emptied into an altar for the discourse of power. The father grips Li Wan's thin shoulders with one hand and pins her down on the sofa, forcing her to apologize to her grandparents (Figure 5.2.2) ; she escapes from her father's hand after several struggles and attempts to hide in the bathroom, but her father ends up catching up with her at a fast pace, kicking her in the back, taking strides to come back, and strangling her; her father's scolding grows louder and denser; the ambient sound disappears altogether, and the scolding sound is amplified, creating a reverberating, reverberation-like effect, each syllable striking the audience's eardrums like a heavy hammer. This sound amplification is not simply an emotional rendering, as Chion points out, it's a strong narrative tool by contrasting it with other sounds (Chion 1994, 57). In the acoustic vacuum, the father's admonition is sublimated from a daily conversation to an institutional disciplinary ritual, and the amplitude of his voice directly corresponds to the hierarchical order of difference in the family's power structure.



Figure 5.2.2

Li Wan's silence here forms a double resistance: the loss of voice in physical corresponds to the refusal of identity in psychological. When her father presses her neck and repeats, "Grandma and Grandpa are not well, you can't cause trouble on purpose anymore, apologies to them!", Li Wan is forced to surrender to the extreme violence of this repression and has to apologize. This is followed by a close-up of Li Wan's bloodstained hands in an upward shot, with her silently sobbing face deflated into the background. This silence is a brutal counterpoint to the father's high-pitched voice, and underneath the seemingly tame, heterogeneous forces are building up in silence.

As the reprimand escalates, the father's voice begins to take on a metallic vibrato, this audio distortion that implies an inherent crack in the authoritative discourse. When he says, "Tell me, what do you want? What do we owe you?", his vocal cords rupture in agitation, and Li Wan can do nothing but look down horrified, unable to respond. At this moment, the silence is no longer an empty vessel, but as Barthes puts it, "a blank symbol full of tension" (Barthes 1978, 41). In the negative space of the soundscape, the spectator can hear the unspoken question: isn't it a kind of violence to ask a young girl to take on the responsibility of caring for the adult's emotions without giving her equal respect?

This scene takes a crucial turn: the father slaps Li Wan in her face, and she lets out a sharp shriek. The filmmakers in this violent scene transform the physical vibration of sound into a psychological impact. The little girl's shrill, high-frequency shriek is deliberately elevated in the mixing track, making it an aural dagger that pierces the veil of familial affection. As Lacan's theory the Mirror Stage reveals, this admonition is essentially a symbolic violence of a father imposing his ideal mirror image of himself on his daughter.

At the end of the admonition, the father's voice begins to sound tired and raspy, where the filmmaker subtly implants the decaying effect of room reverberation. When he says, "You finally know that you're sorry!", the coda disappears into the grandmother's sobs and his own heavy breathing, a sound montage signaling the collapse of authoritative discourse. The sound designer used the "negative space emphasis method" here, using the excessive clarity of the

ambient sound to contrast the inner chaos of the characters. Everyone is in silence and grief at this moment, especially Li Wan, who locks herself in the bathroom and cries in silence, and in the muted state her cries gain a accusatory power than her hissing. When the slow-paced sad soundtrack kicks in, it dawns on the audience that previously suppressed emotional outbursts are regaining meaning in silence. This change in sound effect is consistent with Kristeva's semiotic concept of a "the chora"(Kristeva 1980, 146-149), in which silence becomes a blasting point for the deconstruction of the existing symbolic order.

The admonishment scene, lasting four minutes and thirty-eight seconds, performs an acoustic dissection of the family's power hierarchy through the meticulous layering of sound effects. From the opening assertion of authority, the father's voice—initially resonant and commanding—gradually becomes estranged by sound processing, its timbre hollowed until it remains merely as an empty energetic residue. In contrast, Li Wan's silence ascends from a passive representation of subjugation to a form of deconstructive presence, a silent force that unsettles the sonic regime around her. This dialectical transformation within the soundscape exemplifies what Sterne terms the "audible technique of power" (Sterne 2003, 23–25) —the way sound operates as a means of control and resistance. In "Einstein and Einstein", sound functions not only as a medium of authority but also as the very terrain upon which defiance takes shape. While the adult world weaves a network of discipline through its speech and commands, Li Wan's silence incubates the possibility of both deconstruction and reconstruction within the realm of muted cries. In this sense, silence is not the negation of sound but its most radical rearticulation.

Through accurate sound design, the film externalizes the emotional repression of Li Wan's troubled upbringing into a palpable auditory experience. One of the representative scenes is when she is violently slapped by her father for insisting on finding her lost dog Einstein, the ambient sound suddenly disappears, leaving only her intense heartbeat and panting to take over the soundstage gradually. This sound strategy mimics the character's physiological reactions, drawing the audience into the subjective world of the character through the spatialization sound, making the silent trauma a deafening declaration of emotion.

The moment her father's slap strikes Li Wan's cheek, all ambient sounds, including the sound of arguing, background vocals, and the objects colliding, are temporarily removed, creating an absolute auditory vacuum. The abruptness of this sound effect is in brutal contrast to Li's staggering backward movement on the screen: her body is thrown back from the impact, and the auditory space instantly collapses into the muffled heartbeat sound and the crushing breath, with a trembling intake of air. Here the filmmakers use binaural recording to make the heartbeat emerge in three dimensions from both channels, as if it were hitting the audience's eardrums directly, while the wheezing has a wet reverberation that suggests blocked nasal passages and stagnant tears.



Figure 5.2.3

On the screen, Li Wan's entire body stumbles backward with her father's slap, her grandfather sits helplessly on the sofa in the depths of the scene, and her grandmother immediately rises and prepares to protect Li Wan, forming a shocked group portrait of the entire family (Figure 5.2.3). This graphic presentation is intertextual with a focus on sound: while the domestic violence is physically inflicted on the young girl's body, her sensory world is experiencing an even more violent dissociation - the heartbeat spreads from the chest cavity to the entire soundstage, suggesting the huddling of self-consciousness; the amplification of the breathing is like a trapped animal inside a glass enclosure, exposing the private vital signs as public symbols of trauma. The amplification of breathing is like a trapped animal inside a glass enclosure, exposing private physical signs as public symbols of trauma.

Altman states that subjective sound, by simulating the character's perceptual filter layer, causes the audience to temporarily abandon the omniscient perspective and enter the character's cognitive framework instead (Altman 1992, 23). In the scene cited above, the sound designer achieves this immersion through a three-step strategy:

Cutting off the audience's perceptual anchor to external reality through the elimination of ambient sounds, compelling their attention to turn inside the body. The amplification of physiological sounds, such as heartbeat (survival instinct) and breathing (emotional fluctuations), is transformed into narrative language, where the acceleration of the heartbeat is a metaphor for the escalation of fear, and the disruption of breathing corresponds to the collapse of psychological defenses. Through the dynamic contraction of spatialization in sound, characters' subjective feelings are concretized. Initially, the heartbeat seems to emanate from the chest, then gradually wraps around the audience, eventually forming a 360-degree surround in the stereo sound field, creating a sense of vertigo of being trapped in Li Wan's consciousness. This design subverts the traditional melodramatic mode of family ethical dramas. At the violent moment, the filmmaker refuses to use the soundtrack as an expression of sadness and instead eliminates the possibility of moral judgment by using raw physical sound. Rather than sympathizing with the character as a bystander, the viewer is obliged to "become" Li Wan, experiencing the trauma as a real shock on a neurological plane.

It is worth noting that the persistence of the heartbeat and breathing does not lead to emotional catharsis, but reinforces the defiant nature of silence. At the peak of the sound's intensity, the scene cuts to a closer shot of Li looking directly at the camera, her brow furrowed and her eyes tearful, but her lips tightened into a stubborn straight line. At this point, the physiological sounds suddenly diminish and are replaced by steeply amplified ambient sounds (her father's scolding, her grandmother's crying and pleading), creating an aurally violent contrast. This suggests that while the young girl tries to guard herself with silence, the real world engulfs her subjectivity with an even more powerful sound.

In this scene, the soundscape first narrows to Li Wan's internal world. The external noises fade until only the rhythmic pulse of her heartbeat and the faint sound of her breathing remain. Surrounded by silence, she confronts the pressure of the voices that have long disciplined her—the father's authority, the grandmother's persuasion—each attempting to define her existence. Yet, instead of responding, Li Wan withdraws inward. Her silence, once a sign of submission, begins to turn into resistance; the non-verbal sound of her body becomes a declaration of presence. Altman emphasizes that the intermittent use of subjective sound creates a “perceptual fissure” (Altman 1992, 41) that exposes the character's fractured psychological state. This fissure mirrors Li Wan's own transition—from self-imposed isolation to the painful confrontation with external reality. The movement of sound from inner to outer focus reflects the traumatic process of being forced to speak within an oppressive acoustic field. Thus, silence in this moment is not the absence of agency, but the transformation of vulnerability into defiance—a private rhythm through which Li Wan asserts her being against the disciplining voices around her.

5.2.2 The Power Game of Sound

In “Einstein and Einstein”, sound is far from a mere narrative carrier, but a precisely choreographed power game. Through the vibration of sounds, and the strength of tones and volumes, the film constructs a hidden map of domination within the Chinese family. When the father rises at a family gathering, the sound is like a hammer crashing the dishes on the dining table, instantly suppressing the grandmother's soft words of comfort and Li Wan's sobs. This hierarchical design is no accident - it is a figurative representation of Foucault's saying that “words represent power”. The father, as the “sovereign” of the family, always dominates the physical space with his high-pitched voice, whether it is the blast of his voice when reprimanding his daughter, or his authoritative assertions over a glass of wine, voice becomes his weapon to consolidate his dominance. Silenced Li Wan is predetermined from the moment she is forced to accept a substitute pet: as the adults' lies come like a torrent, the young girl chooses to build her last fortress of resistance with silence, while the slamming of the door and the suppressed whimpering become a more penetrating indictment. The power game of sound penetrates the social arena, where the mechanical instructions of school radio gymnastics and the disciplinary sounds of the public are woven into an airtight network that tames the individual into the established order. In this way, the film reveals that in the violent system of intergenerational domination, sound is not only the blade of oppression but also the last refuge of those who resist.

From 1:21:04 to 1:26:31, the film shows the father taking Li Wan, her stepmother, and her younger brother to a business dinner, which delays their scheduled visit to an astronomy exhibition. The father's business partner flaunts his success and knowledge, and the father makes an attempt to flatter him and even forces the underage Li Wan to make a toast to achieve a partnership, culminating in Li Wan slamming the door as her stepmother guides her younger brother to demonstrate his ability to recite classical poetry to the crowds. There's no soundtrack, just the business associates talking about their stuff, and the ambient sound is just Li Wan rubbing her chopsticks against the soup plate out of boredom and slamming the door at the end of the meal. In this intense dinner scene, Cao Baoping constructs a miniature sample of Foucault's "disciplined society" (Foucault 1977, 209-210) through minimalist sound design and symbolic visual language. When Li Wan is forcibly dragged into the adult exchange of interests, watches glasses, and slamming doors jointly knit a network of power, which brings the young girl's body, time, and linguistic possibilities into the system of discipline.

The oppressive atmosphere is established at the beginning of the scene through the absence of sound effects. During the 5 minutes and 27 seconds of continuous conversation, the background soundtrack is almost completely blank, except for the sharp noise of Li Wan's chopsticks rubbing against the soup plate, which pierces the silence several times. This unconventional noise is not arbitrary, but an audio-visual translation of Foucault's "localized disciplining" theory (Foucault 1995, 141). Disciplinary power is controlled through the constant surveillance of details, and Li Wan's unconsciously created shrillness is an amplification of the "smallest faults" in the disciplinary apparatus - any deviation from the norms will be focused on by the soundscape and become a legitimate target of power's disciplining. When her father forces her to make a toast (Figure 5.2.4), the muffled sound of liquid against the glass is deliberately amplified. This close-up of the sound effect visualizes the ritual violence of social discipline as a physical vibration. Foucault notes that "a body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (Foucault 1995, 136), the act of toasting itself is the ritualized appropriation of the adolescent body by adult society, and the sound of the clinking glass becomes an auditory witness to the transition of power.



Figure 5.2.4



Figure 5.2.5

There is close-up of the luxury watches (Figure 5.2.5) on the wrists of different people, forming a sophisticated system of time discipline. The enlarged dials of his father's gold Rolex, his business partner's Vacheron Constantin, and her stepmother's diamond watch not only externalize their social status but also step by step show the passing of time, as Li Wan misses more and more of the Astronomy Exhibition, which constitutes what Foucault called “a strategy of dividing up the sequence of time” (Foucault 1977, 151). The astronomy exhibition time (19:30) is cut up into a game of numbers on a dial, and every second Li Wan misses is materialized as the turning of metal gears that regulate the power to incorporate individual lives into a system of calculation for the collective good through the measurement of time. When her younger brother is asked to recite the *Sanzi Jing* (三字经)⁷⁴, the frame shifts from the hollow pleasantries between the two men to focus on the little boy, camare turns out of the room, watching the whole scenario behind the fence, stepmother is holding the little child in her arms and ranting to the business partner (Figure 5.2.6), a montage juxtaposition that reveals the intergenerational transmission of the technology of regulation. Foucault states that “power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (Foucault 1995, 194), the display of the younger brother's disciplined “cultural capital”⁷⁵ is essentially the fuel for his father's business negotiations, as the memory of the poems becomes a bargaining chip in the power game.

The linguistic exchanges during the meal form a polyphonic chorus of power operations. The business partners construct intellectual hegemony with the philosophical theories related to “Confucius”孔子, “Wudao” 悟道, “Laozi”老子, etc. and their monologues are interspersed

⁷⁴ It is a classic textbook of enlightenment from ancient China, known for its unique “three words makes a sentence” format, concise content, beautiful rhythm, and ease of recitation and dissemination. It covers a range of fields, including literature, history, philosophy, astronomy, geography, and human ethics and righteousness, with traditional values such as benevolence, righteousness, sincerity, respect, and filial piety as core ideas. The history of the book and its author varies from generation to generation, but most scholars believe that it was written by Wang Yinglin 王应麟, a scholar of the Southern Song Dynasty, to educate the children of his clan. The historical part of the original text is up to the Song Dynasty, followed by continuous additions from various dynasties to create the current version. In the film, the stepmother guides Li Wan's brother to recite this text to echo the opinions of a business partner and to satisfy his vanity so that her husband might be able to secure this cooperation.

⁷⁵ The concept of cultural capital in this context refers to the transformation of an individual and its acquired cultural material objects into capital that can be traded or facilitated to be traded.

with classical Chinese literary imagery to form an auditory compartmentalization. This confirms Procedures of Discourse Exclusion⁷⁶ - a particular body of knowledge becomes the access point for the class. The stepmother guides Li Wan's younger brother to recite poetry as a performance approach, commodifying the outcome of family education into a social currency. This “public execution” (Foucault 1995, 34) is in essence an alienation of the “Technology of the Self” whereby the child is trained to become a “Manpower Capital”⁷⁷ that can be invoked at any time, in this case, his linguistic ability is no longer a matter of self-expression, but rather a signifier that circulates in the power network.



Figure 5.2.6

The moment Li Wan finally slams the door, the sound makes a dramatic reversal from repression to explosion. The slamming sound is not an ear-splitting bang, but loud enough for everyone to notice, it breaks the meticulously maintained acoustic order of the disciplinary space. The slamming of the door, as a violent expression of non-verbal symbols, is both a rejection of bodily discipline and a mockery of discursive hegemony, its sonic residue triggering a preoccupation that resembles the indelible traces left by the resisters in the power network. This banquet ultimately becomes a miniature battlefield of discipline and resistance. When Li Wan disappears from the picture, leaving behind the dials that continue to move around the table, Foucault's warning is ringing: we are in a society in which the mechanisms of power are becoming more and more subtle, more and more difficult to recognize, and which are directly shaping the form of our subjects. In this silent war, every regulated person can be a prisoner and a potential breaker.

⁷⁶ Michel Foucault outlines the "procedures of exclusion" as the fundamental social mechanisms that control, select, and organize the production of discourse. He states, "In every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers." These procedures primarily include prohibition, the division between reason and madness, and the most foundational principle, the "will to truth." See Michel Foucault, "The Discourse on Language," in *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 8-17.

⁷⁷ The concept is similar to the economic concept of “human capital”, but in this context it prefers the element of earning additional bonuses by demonstrating one's talents.

5.2.3 Metaphors for ambient sounds

The soundscape of the film “Einstein and Einstein” is like a prism that reflects the struggle of the young girl Li Wan between adult discipline and self-awakening. In this film, which explores the dilemmas of growing up through the lens of family ethics, the sound design breaks through the function of mere environmental reproduction and becomes a narrative booster. When Li Wan is sobbing silently in the bathroom, a low angle camera caught her bleeding hands (Figure 5.2.7), then her shrinking body is reflected in the mirror next to her with steaming rising up (Figure 5.2.8). the reverberation of the water rushing over the tiles causes an oppressive sound in the confined space. This amplified ambient sound is no longer a simple rendering of the scene, but rather, it materializes the shame and loneliness that characterize adolescence into a palpable sound cage. The dog's barking, as a key motivator throughout the film, constructs a double metaphor between the physical space and the spiritual dimension: when Einstein first enters Li's life, the barking is the medium to break the silence in the house; when the second Einstein is shoved into her life, the barking becomes a symbol of the authority's domestication towards the will of the individual.



Figure 5.2.7



Figure 5.2.8

These elaborate sound networks transform the unspoken expectations and unheard demands and deliberately ignore injuries of family education into penetrating aural imagery, engraving in the spectator's hearing emotional scars that are more enduring than the images. When the end subtitles are accompanied by a dog barking, the audiences realize that there is such a thrilling truth of growth hidden in the voices that have been neglected in daily life.

In the film, the encounter between Li Wan and her first dog, Einstein, through this scene, Michel Chion's theory of “Added Value” (Chion 1994, 21) deconstructs the auditory hegemony of domestic space through the sophisticated design of the barking, completing the sonic empowerment of the young girl's subjectivity. In the following section, Chion's theoretical framework can analyze in depth the poetics of sound in this scene.

The dinner at the grandparents' house, the grandparents' tinged with guilt yet highly manipulative exchanges with each other, and the sound of spoons clinking together create a depressing tone. The camera skims over the steaming meal on the dining table, Li Wan gets up and carries her bowl of food towards the direction of the living room, the program playing on the television catches her attention, she sits on the sofa and eats while watching the television, at this moment a faint whimpering of a baby dog comes, Li Wan is still engrossed in the television program and doesn't notice it, with the puppy's persistent yelping Li Wan notices the sound, she is firstly skeptical of what she hears, swings her head around, then switches off the

TV to confirm the barking, finally looks around the TV to discover that there is a dog, and then looks at it. She approaches and slowly opens the cardboard box, a golden retriever puppy inside, Li Wan is filled with joy as she asks where the puppy came from, but when her grandmother tells her that it's a gift from her father, the joy immediately disappears and she coldly rejects it.

We can divide the sounds in this scene into three distinct layers, the first is the subdued sound base, i.e. the grandparents' communication, the TV program, and the clattering of spoons and bowls. They comprise what Chion calls a "Wallpaper Sound"⁷⁸ (Chion 1994, 73), whose repetitive rhythms form a microscopic power network of "auditory discipline". The sound of the spoons against the bowls is deliberately amplified and ideologically complicit with the sound of the television program, shaping the dinner moment into a ritual space of intergenerational discipline. The second layer I define as "TV Sound Fissile"⁷⁹. When Li Wan walks towards the living room with her food, the "TV program sound" serves as a "Sound Object"⁸⁰ (Chion 1994, 108) that temporarily rips the disciplinary sound frame. The television program sound in that context derives a new function from the components of the first layer, which no longer exists as a simple ambient sound, but generates other ideographic functions. For example, in this case, it became the background noise, and its entertainment properties form an "auditory counterpoint" to the physiological rhythm of Li Wan's unconscious swallowing, suggesting a dormant state of the subject's consciousness. The third layer is the violent intervention of barking. The "puppy's whine" pierces the disciplinary sound arena as a "acousmatic sound" (Chion 1994, 71), and Chion notes that additional sounds can create new dimensions of meaning. In this case, the barking of the dog completes the narrative assault through three "sonic additions" -- firstly, the spatial addition, where the whimpering oozes out from the direction of the living room, revealing the presence of an occluded space. Secondly, there is the psychological value added, as the persistent barking prompts Li Wan to bob her head and look around, the sound becomes a guiding thread for her vision. Finally, there is the symbolic value-added: when the Golden Retriever shows up in the cardboard box, the whimpering and the scratching constitute an "audio-visual contract" (Chion 1994, 216), which translates the animalistic need into the young girl's emotion longing.

The dog's barking, as a primitive shout of life, is not only a resistance to the domestic spatial discipline but also a limited empowerment of freedom under the patriarchal system. By the time Li Wan finally accepts this dog from her father, the barking has been quietly transformed

⁷⁸ Michel Chion uses the concept of the sonic carpet to describe a layer of sound, often ambient or environmental, that creates a continuous and immersive foundation for a scene. Unlike focused dialogue or sound effects, the sonic carpet is not meant to be actively listened to but serves to establish the tonal quality, mood, and spatial atmosphere of the cinematic world. This sound "does not demand to be listened to" but provides a perceptual ground against which other audio elements figure. This concept is elaborated in his work on audio-vision (Chion, 1994).

⁷⁹ This definition borrows from the original meaning of "Fission": the splitting or disintegration of a physical or chemical process, resulting in the creation of two or more new associated substances or particles. In this context, it refers to the creation of a new function for this sound element.

⁸⁰ Michel Chion adapts Pierre Schaeffer's concept of the Sound Object (*objet sonore*) for film sound analysis. It refers to a fragment of sound treated as a discrete and self-contained perceptual unit, divorced from its real-world cause. In cinema, a sound object is often a recorded sound that is manipulated, repeated, and placed into relation with images and other sounds to create meaning, rather than functioning simply as a realistic effect. This concept is central to understanding how sound works beyond mere representation in his audio-visual theory (Chion, 1994).

into a “safe noise” within the disciplinary system - it is no longer initially destructive, but has been incorporated as an ornament of her subjectivity.



Figure 5.2.9

In the film, in the scene where cousin Li Tang takes Li Wan out to meet her boyfriend (Figure 5.2.9) , the three teenagers share one bicycle, Li Wan sits in the front, the boy rides the bike, and the cousin stands behind, the three of them talking and laughing as they head to the roller skating rink, the camera is fixed in the middle of the street to film them as they slowly merge into the street's flow of people and drunken peers. The sound of bicycles grinding on the ground, teenagers laughing and joking, crowd exchanges and car horns, and even the unseen sounds of a distant construction site form a noisy backdrop. When they reached the roller skating rink, the flashing lights of various colors reflected and the rhythm of the dynamic music made the inner restlessness of the teenagers even more manifest. Li Wan was standing on the railing looking out at the crowd, slightly helplessly, isolated from all of them (Figure 5.2.10). When her cousin's boyfriend takes the initiative to bring her into the rink and slowly begins to skate, although her whole body is tense and her movements are stiff, she slowly integrates into the environment and is no longer completely lonely. But this engagement disappears as the cousin joins in again.



Figure 5.2.10

The street scene and roller skating rink scene in which the three teenagers share one bicycle, through sophisticated sound design and spatial choreography, construct a teenage social field full of power metaphors. The camera gazes at the street with a fixed-camera long shot, and the

creaking sound of the bikes crushing the ground, the giggling of the teenagers, the sound of metal crashing at the construction site in the distance, and the sound of traffic horns in the near distance interweave into a polyphonic sound ripple. As they enter the roller skating rink, the bass-heavy vibrations of electronic music and the friction of roller skates create a new layer of soundscape, and the flickering neon light cuts the space into a disciplined grid.

The street soundscape knits a power net of regimented preludes. The regular grinding of bicycle wheels and the mechanical impact of a construction site comprise a dual-power soundscape. The former, as a mobile sound source, continuously cuts across the backdrop, suggesting modernity's regulation of individual trajectories; the latter anchors the space with the violent rhythm of metal crashes, forming an acoustic metaphor for what Foucault called "hierarchical observation" (Foucault 1995, 170-171). Collectively, these two sounds compose an aural map of the urban disciplinary network: mobile trajectories are encoded by the traffic system, and living spaces are reshaped by the architectural process. The laughter of teenagers emerges as a foreground sound, its pitch and rhythm continuously interrupted by ambient noise. This sound montage reveals a mechanism of control underneath the apparent freedom - their dialogue never breaks through the matrix of the soundscape, just like the watch in Foucault's "panoramic prison", where any transgressions are swallowed up by the ambient sound. The wailing of the car horn is an acoustic representation of the symbol of discipline, forming a fluid power gaze in locating the sound source.

The sound and light of the roller skating rink provide a second encoding of the regimented space. Upon entering the rink, the kinetic quality of electronic music and the mechanical nature of the skating sounds constitute the two engines of discipline. The beat of the music is transmitted through the skeleton to generate the rhythm of the body's discipline, and the youth's unconscious skating movements are synchronized with the music, fulfilling what Foucault called "subjectification" (Foucault 1995, 201). This physical training realized through acoustic energy, transforms external control into an internal rhythm, completing the acoustic ritual of subject production. The stroboscopic effect of neon light and specular reflections create visual discipline. Li Wan's isolated figure at the balustrade is fragmented into mirrored images, a machine for dissociating the see/being seen (Foucault 1995, 200) that exposes her to the panoramic gaze while preventing her from identifying herself through the full mirror image. When her cousin's boyfriend brings her in, the additional roller-skating sounds temporarily reconcile her bodily rhythms with the soundscape. However, the cousin's re-intervention disrupts this fragile equilibrium-disciplining power achieves sustained presence through the acoustic encoding of interpersonal relationships.

Li Wan's soundtrack presents an acoustic translation of the existential predicament. Initially, as the silent source, her breathing is masked by the ambient sound, reflecting the absence of subjectivity; the skating body resonates with the music rhythm, forming a fleeting self-affirmation; and finally, her cousin's laughter overrides her presence as a foreground sound, hinting at the control of disciplinary power achieved through intimacy. This is where Schafer's "added value" theory gains a political dimension: the soundscape not only reveals psychological states but also becomes an acoustic field for the production of power. The sound

and light system of the roller skating rink constitutes a “disciplinary mechanism” (Foucault 1995, 107) that recreates the subject through the colonization of the senses. Li Wan's process of bodily coordination is essentially an acoustic practice in which the disciplined subject accepts and internalizes a power logic.

Through the intertextuality of soundscape and space, this scene completes a critical dissection of the adolescent's socialization process. The oppressive nature of the street soundscape and the disciplinary character of the sound and light from the roller-skating rink jointly construct a micro-model of the “disciplinary society” (Foucault 1995, 209) in Foucault's sense. The collision of electronic music and metal clashing reveals that modernity reproduces power through sensory penetration, while Li Wan's bodily traces become tragic poetics of the disciplined subject's struggle in the soundscape matrix. As the spectators withdraw from the roller-skating rink with the sound storms, the persistent ambient sounds remind us that the disciplinary devices never really recede; they were just internalized as an acoustic gene in the modern subject's existence.

5.3 Spatial Metaphors: The Loneliness of Hustle

In the image poetics of “Einstein and Einstein”, space has long since transcended the mere definition of territory and has become a metaphorical battlefield of discipline and resistance, repression and breakthrough. The young girl Li Wan huddles in the cracks of the adult world. Her living space is divided into three mutually tearing dimensions: the family space as a laboratory of discipline, the urban building forest as a labyrinth of alienation, and the third space that sparks the fire of resistance - the bedroom, and the skating rink, which all together construct a lonely picture of the modern individual suffocating in the hustle.

The family space, as the most private place of existence, is alienated into a miniature prison for disciplining power in the film. The confrontation between Li Wan and her father is permanently set in the cramped living room: in the cold light cast by the crystal chandelier, the father violently pins his daughter down on the sofa and apologizes to her grandparents, a ritualistic scene that transforms affection into an altar for power. The mantra of “for your good” is twisted into a net of family intimacy, squeezing the girl's emotional needs into a distorted shadow in the corner of the living room. When Li Wan, who has experienced her father's violent taming, calmly appears in the same space the next day, this “home”, which has been reconstructed by the rites of passage, has long since been reduced to a spatial theatre where emotional violence is legitimized.

The city space has become a typical site where the alienation of urban modernization is most vividly manifested. Li Wan walks through the neon light reflected on the glass walls; the exquisite restaurant entrance forms an absurd counterpoint to her anxiety about missing the astronomical exhibition, and the revolving wooden horse in the playground carries hollow laughter. These symbolic spaces, encoded by consumerist aesthetics, refract the girl's confusion into an existential absurdity. When she chases the lost Einstein through the streets late at night, the fragmented lights cut her lonely figure into pieces. This urban jungle has long

dissolved the warmth of traditional communal ties, leaving only spatial segregation and symbolic violence.

This spatial alienation echoes Lefebvre's concept of the "produced space" (Lefebvre 1991, 26), in which urban environments are shaped not merely by physical construction but by power relations and capitalist logics that determine social behavior. In the Chinese context, such alienation also corresponds to what Zhang describes as the "postsocialist urban transformation" (Zhang 2008, 14-17), where the rapid modernization and commodification of everyday life displace emotional intimacy and collective belonging. Thus, Li Wan's drifting through fragmented urban spaces is not only a personal wandering but also a microcosmic reflection of the wider social and spatial dislocation in contemporary China.

Precisely under such pressure, the Third Space reveals itself as a precious value of resistance. In the streaming light beneath the ice, the briefly resonant arcs of Li Wan and her cousin cut through the gravity of discipline. The ice crystals raised by their spinning refract the prism of resistance in the neon, the cracks temporarily forgotten by the discipline system. The starry sky projected from the planetarium's dome has become a utopia that she has never been able to step into, and the real starry sky outside the glass wall is obscured by the haze, but in her imagination, it spreads out into an escape route. Most symbolically, when she curls up on her bedroom window and the night breeze lifts her exercise book, those untamed thoughts are like vines growing in the night, searching for the light in the cracks of the concrete forest.

Those Third Spaces are like chisels, chiseling ventilation holes in the brick walls of discipline. Li Wan's short-lived weightlessness while skating on the ice, her longing to look up at the starry sky outside the planetarium, and her tiny ritual of isolating herself from the world with headphones in the bedroom are all manifestations of the difficulty in breaking out of the spatial cage. When the disciplined society braids the standard of "correctness" into a dragnet, these neglected marginal spaces become Noah's Ark that guards the subjectivity, preserving the possibility of a breakthrough in the hustle of loneliness.

5.3.1 Oppressive Domestic Space

The film constructs a theatrical demonstration of power through the enclosed setting of the family dinner scene (46:33–47:12). In "Einstein and Einstein", this dinner sequence—occurring after the fake Einstein is forcibly introduced into the household—functions as a subtle metaphor for spatial politics. Through meticulous visual and acoustic design, the scene produces a suffocating network of power relations. Lefebvre's theory of spatial *production* finds visual translation here: when domestic space is transformed into an instrument of discipline, the dining table becomes a miniature stage for enacting power dynamics.



Figure 5.3.1

When the camera cuts into the scene from a low-angle shot, the parallel lines on the back of the chair form a dense striped structure, a compositional device implying dual layers of oppression (Figure 5.3.1). First, the tilted visual axis forces the viewer into the position of the disciplined subject. Li Wan's bowed head and silent eating, framed in a triangular composition that narrows upward, create a sense of visual gravity pressing down upon her—a tangible embodiment of what Foucault calls the omnipresent gaze of the Panopticon (Foucault 1977, 200). Second, the invisible ceiling—never shown on screen—is reinforced as an impenetrable dome of authority. As the stepmother's incessant ingratiating voice echoes within the confined space, the reverberation between ceiling and floor forms an acoustic circuit that transforms verbal violence into a physical presence.

The spatial distribution of figures establishes a precise power topology. The grandparents sit at the visual center of the frame, forming a stable isosceles triangle—a classic family portrait composition that reproduces the symbolic hierarchy of the traditional patriarchal order. The stepmother occupies the lower right, her seat aligned vertically with the dog, forming a channel of disciplinary transduction: the leash's shadow on the floor visually links verbal coercion to physical control. The cousin's back, turned toward the camera, creates a metaphorical barrier of spatial isolation; her straight spine forms a sharp counterpoint to Li Wan's hunched shoulders, conveying intergenerational repression through body language alone.

Li Wan, confined to the lower left corner of the frame, sits at an unstable angle to the table, her posture signaling precariousness. As the camera pans slowly downward, she gradually fades beyond the frame—an off-screen gesture suggesting that her silenced desires can survive only outside the visible order. On the horizontal axis, her dinner plate and the stepmother's teacup form a visual counterpoint, symbolizing the transfer of power through everyday objects. The dog's substitution within this domestic space acts as a materialized metonymy of disciplinary violence. The leash attached to the chair leg casts serpentine shadows across the floor, while the vertical table legs form the spatial code of a regimented society. This "object-human" relationship transposes the logic of pet domestication directly onto the disciplining of the girl. As the stepmother narrates trivial family stories, her gestures remain within the dog's radius of

movement—a spatial choreography that seamlessly merges verbal and physical control. The dining table’s wooden texture, alternating between light and shadow under overhead illumination, becomes a “spatial texture” that externalizes the trauma projected by a disciplining society onto a young heart. When the camera glides over the table’s frayed edges, the scars of past violence are materialized, transforming the space itself into a witness of suffering.

Ultimately, this dinner scene demonstrates how spatial violence becomes internalized within the subject’s perception. As Li Wan’s curled figure gradually merges with the surrounding shadows, the viewer perceives how domestic discipline infiltrates the body through ritualized gestures. This spatial politics not only manifests visible hierarchies but also reshapes subjectivity at a deeper structural level. As Lefebvre asserts, “(social) space is a (social) product... the locus of all social relations” (Lefebvre 1991, 26). Within this confined dining room, space becomes both a theatre for the performance of power and an alchemical vessel for the dissolution of agency, pushing the logic of modern social discipline to its visual and emotional limit.

In “Einstein and Einstein”, the recurring image of the fence forms the visual and conceptual framework for the girl’s struggle. In the following section, I draw upon Deleuze’s concept of “enclosed space” to analyze spatial oppression in specific scenes—such as the sports field railing and the barred window—and explore how these devices visually encode discipline and mirror the characters’ psychological entrapment.

In the scene from 1:06:43 to 1:07:30, after Li Wan earns the highest English score in school, she receives the news on the sports field from her teacher (Figure 5.3.2). Though seemingly a moment of success, learning English has always been her father’s imposition, not her choice. The field’s metal parapet visualizes the embodiment of social discipline: its cold, repetitive vertical lines fragment the spectator’s gaze into isolated windows. This composition places characters in a constant state of exposure, echoing Foucault’s (1975) panoptic effect (Foucault 1995, 201), where the subject remains perpetually visible under invisible surveillance. Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) concept of “striated space” is vividly realized here: the sports field’s fenced grid encodes the terrain into a binary of “accessible” and “forbidden,” defining social movement through physical boundaries. When Li Wan turns sideways to make a phone call to her father, the parapet vanishes from the frame—yet its disciplinary force lingers. The school’s spatial design, like its ideology, gradually domesticates her will and restricts her autonomy.



Figure 5.3.2

The barred window composition extends this disciplinary logic into the domestic sphere. Throughout the film, Li Wan leans against the iron bars—eating instant noodles, memorizing vocabulary, or mourning Einstein’s loss—while the frame is diagonally bisected at 45 degrees by the grill’s geometry. The bars’ shadow forms a cold lattice across the wall, contrasted with the warm yellow interior light (Figure 5.3.3). This intimate space, carved by metal grids, functions simultaneously as a physical barrier and a psychological constraint. When Li Wan presses her forehead to the cold iron, the vertical lines cast a prison-like shadow upon her face. The foreground bars establish a dual relationship of gazing and being gazed upon. As Mulvey argues, female figures in patriarchal visual culture are often constructed as objects of the gaze (Mulvey 1975, 11). Here, the domestic window bars literalize this dynamic—transforming the girl into an object of invisible surveillance within her patriarchal household.



Figure 5.3.3

In the film’s climax, Li Wan crouches within the barred space—its diamond lattice resembling both a spider’s web and a prison’s cage. As rainwater slides down the mesh, refracted light scatters across the floor. The structure, coded as a device of “safety and security,” becomes a metaphor for modern existence ensnared by its own systems. Deleuze observes that space is not a neutral container but a field of forces and power relations (Deleuze 1987, 23). The

suffocating grid density of the bars exemplifies this; Li Wan's repeated touch upon the iron surface signifies the forced internalization of spatial control. Her eventual acceptance of the new dog as a substitute for Einstein testifies to her alienation under the weight of spatial oppression.



Figure 5.3.4

In the skating scene, the ice rink's glass wall replaces the metal fence. This seemingly open, transparent design introduces a new visibility regime (Figure 5.3.4): when Li Wan observes her younger brother through the glass, her young brother's helmeted head bobbed back and forth in the foreground with each tumble, repeatedly overlapping with Li Wan in the background, merging observer and observed—a visual metaphor for the intergenerational transmission of discipline. Such recurring spatial symbols consolidate into the collective memory of a regulated society. As Deleuze and Guattari contend, “Space is not a neutral medium but a battlefield where power circulates” (Deleuze, Guattari 1987, 23). The fences and barriers throughout “Einstein and Einstein” are not merely architectural motifs but material manifestations of the mechanisms of social control. When Li Wan ultimately yields to reality, the film refuses to offer a simple coming-of-age fable. Instead, it interrogates the possibility of personal freedom under the ongoing process of modernization—leaving viewers with an open-ended longing for a life beyond the fence.

5.3.2 Urban Discipline and Spatial Alienation

In “Einstein and Einstein”, urban space transcends its role as a mere narrative backdrop to become the core imagery through which the film explores the adolescent experience of discipline and alienation. The film constructs an urban “cage” of repression through figurative spaces such as playground parapets, barred windows, and towering buildings. These cold metallic fences and concrete landscapes penetrate Li Wan's daily life, casting a shadow of psychological alienation over her consciousness.

Deleuze's concept of the “closed space” vividly manifests here: the city encodes individuals within systems of predetermined trajectories and controlled visibility. Li Wan's figure, gazing at the stars through the barred window, becomes an allegory for the modern urban dweller

trapped in a survival grid. This sense of spatial alienation echoes Simmel's insight in *The Metropolis and Mental Life*—that when traditional communal bonds are replaced by reinforced concrete and economic rationality, the individual becomes a solitary wanderer in the urban desert (Simmel 1950, 409–424). In the film, this alienation is visualized through compositional symmetry and framing: the vertical guardrails of the playground and the geometric cuts of streets and buildings merge into an invisible network of social control. As Li Wan moves silently through these spaces, her crossings become an unspoken interrogation of the dilemmas of modern life. Urban spatial alienation here reflects not only the repression inherited from familial discipline but also the broader existential crisis of individuals in the process of urbanization.

When Li Wan runs frantically through the streets at night searching for the missing Einstein, the filmmaker employs a wide-angle lens to capture the urban landscape. Amid the darkness, only scattered streetlights emit a dim glow. Li Wan's cries echo unanswered through the empty streets. The cold, rigid buildings dominate the frame with exaggerated verticality, compressing the girl's slight figure into the end of the street (Figure 5.3.5). This deliberate imbalance of spatial scale reduces the individual to an insignificant fragment within the city. Soja notes that “postmodern urban space creates a sense of insignificance through an imbalance in visual scale” (Soja 1996, 81). In this moment, the contrast between the skyscrapers and the fragile figure of the girl embodies the confrontation between the individual and the social system. When Li Wan looks up at the glass façades of the buildings, the faint reflected light symbolizes how desire is encoded within the logic of consumerism—dissolving her subjectivity into the glittering surface of the modern city.



Figure 5.3.5



Figure 5.3.6

The handheld cinematography further visualizes the physical and emotional turbulence of discipline. The shaky camera movement creates a palpable breathing rhythm, immersing the viewer in Li Wan's anxiety. As the camera sweeps past shuttered shops and deserted streets, the indifference of urban space becomes a physical barrier (Figure 5.3.6). The scene graphically evokes Foucault's notion of the panoptic (Foucault 1977, 200) urban environment, where the discipline of visibility restricts movement even without direct surveillance. As Li Wan runs beneath the camera, she becomes an involuntary participant in a network of social control. This spatial discipline suppresses physical freedom while infiltrating the psyche through the contagion of anxiety. When she is eventually forced to accept a new dog as a substitute for Einstein, her reluctant compromise becomes not a fable of growth but a tragic confirmation of the pervasive and inescapable logic of spatial discipline. Amid the passionate yet indifferent rhythm of modern life, every soul seeks a breakthrough—but the film leaves us with a haunting question about the price of adaptation in an alienated urban world.

Within this framework, the school functions as a miniature model of disciplinary power. Its rigid spatial layout and visual symbols externalize Li Wan's psychological alienation under institutional education. The English classroom scene provides a particularly precise representation. Distracted and unable to answer the teacher's question, Li Wan becomes a silent emblem of resistance. Her classmates' indifference amplifies her isolation. When a bat suddenly flies into the classroom, chaos ensues—the teacher shouts in vain, and finally kills the bat with a textbook, throwing its body out the window. The camera mimics the bat's frantic flight through rapid bokeh and unstable movement, externalizing both the bat's agitation and Li Wan's repressed panic. The bat's fate becomes a cruel metaphor for the individual's collision with the disciplinary order.



Figure 5.3.7

The classroom adopts a strict symmetrical composition (Figure 5.3.7): desks form a geometric grid, transforming visual order into a spatial mechanism of discipline. Foucault observes that “modern educational space realizes physical discipline through geometric order” (Foucault 1977, 148). The standardized arrangement of desks mirrors the structure of the Panopticon, where each student is simultaneously visible and monitored. The close-up of Li Wan fixed in her seat shows how this spatial discipline extends from the physical to the psychological—

gestures and postures are regulated to conform to group norms, and deviations are instantly corrected. The sudden intrusion of the bat, however, disrupts this rigid order. As a wild symbol of nature, the bat's erratic flight contrasts sharply with the regimented geometry of the classroom. The shaky camera aligns the viewer's perspective with the bat's, momentarily freeing both Li Wan and the audience from the suffocating discipline. This brief rupture embodies the instinctive resistance of individual consciousness against spatial repression, while the blurred imagery visualizes Li Wan's internal turmoil. Yet, the teacher's violent restoration of order underscores Foucault's idea of the restorative function of discipline (Foucault 1977, 177), which swiftly reasserts control over transgression.



Figure 5.3.8

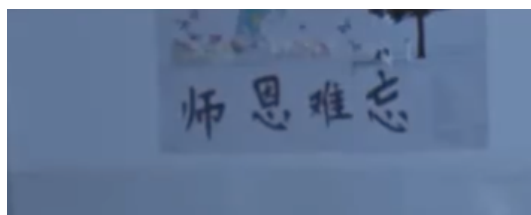


Figure 5.3.9

Power within this scene operates through a multi-layered network. The teacher functions as the explicit disciplinarian, enforcing order through gaze and command; the students, particularly those in the front row, become surrogate monitors, their collective backward glances forming a micro-network of surveillance. When Li Wan seeks help from a classmate, the latter's immediate refusal exemplifies what Foucault calls the "automatization of power" (Foucault 1977, 177)—each subject internalizes and reproduces the disciplinary structure. Every individual is both watcher and watched, ensuring the continuity of control. The national flag (Figure 5.3.8) and the mural reading "Unforgettable Teacher's Honour"⁸¹ (Figure 5.3.9) on the wall operate as dual ideological symbols: the flag embodies collective ideology, while the mural visualizes the educational merit system as tangible honor. Together, they form an ideological network of educational discipline. The close-up (Figure 5.3.10) of Li Wan gazing at the dead bat symbolizes her self-objectification under this evaluative system—like the bat, she becomes a creature unable to integrate into the ordered environment. The school space thus emerges as a microcosm of social hierarchy: the evenly spaced desks metaphorically transform students into standardized products on an assembly line. Li Wan's silence parallels the broken dream from the astronomy class, revealing how education, through spatial design and symbolic control, reproduces social discipline. This alienation, then, is not merely spatial or institutional but also an existential anxiety about one's future identity in a stratified, disciplinary society.

⁸¹ This phrase is very common in all types of educational institutions in China, and it refers to thanking teachers for their dedication and education to their students. The teacher's rough treatment of Li Wan in that scene is actually very hurtful, and in this case the hanging is highly ironic.



Figure 5.3.10

5.3.3 Resistant Third Space

While Georg Christoph Tholen's concept of the medium as an "in-between space" offers a compelling framework for analyzing the operative and generative logic of media technologies themselves, the present analysis of spatial resistance in "Einstein and Einstein" calls for a theory that more directly engages with the social, political, and representational dimensions of lived space. Edward Soja's Thirdspace theory serves this purpose precisely. It transcends the binary of material and imagined space by introducing a critical, heterogeneous field—a product of "othering" and "thirling"—which becomes the locus for resistance and identity reconstruction (Soja 1996, 56). In the film, two key spaces—Li Wan's bedroom and the planetarium—cinematically embody this theoretical model, together delineating the trajectory of adolescent resistance within a disciplined society.

Li Wan's bedroom (Figure 5.3.11) exemplifies a third space of spiritual refuge—an imaginative enclave carved from an otherwise repressive domestic environment. This confined physical area, less than ten square meters, transforms into a site of symbolic rebellion through intense visual coding. The mottled posters plastered across the walls collage an adolescent mental map: from rock band images to science fiction film stills, each fragment becomes a semiotic resistance against normative reality. The study desk embedded within the wardrobe folds educational discipline into the private domain, while the interlocked stacks of books and compact discs dismantle the hierarchical order of traditional knowledge systems.



Figure 5.3.11

Soja identifies the radical openness quality (Soja 1996, 81) of the third space as its essential quality. Li Wan's absolute control over her bedroom—from the spatial arrangement to the manipulation of light—visualizes this openness as agency. The director accentuates this duality of power and freedom through sharp visual contrasts: the warm glow of a yellow desk lamp intertwines with the cold light from the window, symbolizing both familial estrangement and the individual's struggle to break through the collective unconscious. When her younger brother forcibly intrudes into this imaginary realm (Figure 5.3.12), the fragile boundary between the private and the public collapses. Yet Li Wan's silent defense of her “last spiritual fortress” renders the bedroom a marginal but potent site of rebellion—a microcosmic third space situated at the edge of hegemonic control.



Figure 5.3.12

The planetarium, conversely, elevates this spatial resistance to its symbolic zenith. When Li Wan misses the astronomy exhibition under her father's authoritarian control, she later returns to the closed site at night. The cinematography emphasizes verticality: the towering dome looms over her small figure, creating a visual metaphor of hierarchical power. This physical structure, excluded from domestic and institutional discipline, becomes a space for deconstruction. The camera's slow upward pan signifies a movement of transcendence. Soja argues that the third space possesses “an infinite openness, a continuous expansion beyond the limits of representation” (Soja 1996, 63); the ascending camera thus symbolizes both the physical and psychic awakening of Li Wan. As she gazes helplessly at the distant stars, the planetarium transforms from an instrument of scientific discipline into a symbolic site of escape and re-signification. This fleeting liberation reconfigures spatial meaning at the intersection of the real and the imagined—a cinematic embodiment of what Soja calls the trialectics of being.

The two spaces form a dialectical relationship: the bedroom as the internal other, where resistance is practiced daily within confinement; and the planetarium as the external other, where temporary transcendence is achieved through imagination. Through this spatial duality, Li Wan enacts the othering process described by Soja—continuously constructing alternative realities to confront homogenizing power. Within the bedroom, educational discipline is recontextualized into material for self-expression; within the planetarium, the cultural capital she is denied (the missed exhibition) is converted into the symbolic resource of transgression.

This act of resistance bears postmodern characteristics: Soja links third space politics to the spatial struggles of marginalized groups such as women and minorities (Soja 1996, 82). Li Wan's rebellion can thus be interpreted as a micro-resistance to patriarchal authority within the familial structure.

When she draws star patterns on the glass wall of the planetarium, the hazy overlap between the physical and the spiritual boundaries embodies the paradox of the third space—neither inside nor outside, yet possessing the capacity to subvert both. As Lu Yang observes, the third space is “a liminal field of coexistence, where material and symbolic orders intersect to generate new possibilities of being” (Lu 2018, 47). This moment crystallizes the essence of Li Wan's resistance: the creation of a personal cosmology within the cracks of power, where imagination becomes the ultimate site of freedom.

5.4 Narrative Interaction between Sound and Space

5.4.1 The Power Dialectics of Sound and Space

In “Einstein and Einstein”, the interplay between silence and noise constitutes a deep semiotic code that fuses the auditory and spatial dimensions of narrative. This interaction exemplifies Michel Chion's theory of phantom hearing, which describes how the perception of sound extends beyond its physical source to produce emotional and psychological resonance (Chion 1994, 32). When Li Wan shouts “Einstein!” into the empty street, the echoing reverberation clashes sharply with the muffled noise of the city. This auditory void—an absence of what Chion calls “the voice of expression”—reveals the adult world's indifference to adolescent emotions.

Henri Lefebvre's “production of space” also finds a vivid cinematic translation here. When Li Wan is confined in the closed living room, forced to apologize to her grandparents, the ticking of the mechanical clock and her father's reprimanding voice jointly construct an auditory architecture of discipline. This soundscape of domination materializes the social relations of power Lefebvre refers to as the triad of spatial practice, representation of space, and representational space. The sound environment of the home becomes a physical manifestation of the patriarchal discourse.

A striking instance of this occurs when the fake Einstein is sent to the dog-meat restaurant. The roaring of the exhaust hood and the shattering of dishes create a violent acoustic montage that embodies Lefebvre's assertion that space is a product of social relations (Lefebvre 1991, 26). The combination of visual and aural violence transforms domestic power into a palpable, almost tactile experience. Sound and space here cease to be neutral narrative carriers—they become the scalpel dissecting the power structure of the Chinese family.

5.4.2 The Soundscape of Familial Discipline

The “business banquet”⁸² sequence provides a powerful example of how sound hierarchy mirrors spatial hierarchy. Through the design of the soundtrack, the film merges silence and clamor into a complex structure of social discipline. This dramatization confirms Chion’s acousmatic hierarchy—the phenomenon in which unseen sound sources dominate heard ones, shaping the listener’s perception of power (Chion 1994, 68–69).

When the father attempts to appease Li Wan with hollow promises, the business partner’s slow, muffled voice carries greater sound pressure and authority than Li Wan’s faint, mosquito-like pleas. The partner’s deep, deliberate tone embodies Chion’s notion of a “hierarchy of voices” (Chion 1994, 69), in which dominant social groups occupy the acoustic foreground while the marginalized are silenced. The result is a power structure where adult discourse overwhelms the child’s fragile voice.

This physical contrast of sound levels corresponds to the imbalance of family power. Li Wan’s voice is drowned in the clattering of cutlery and the loud boasting of adults. The “visible versus invisible sound sources” Chion describes are perfectly enacted here: the adults’ laughter (visible) coexists with the oppressive hum of the restaurant (invisible), producing a multi-layered soundscape that visually and aurally enacts domination.

The banquet’s spatial design intensifies this effect. When the father traps Li Wan at the table under the pretext of flattering his partner—“drinking with you, Zhang, is the greatest honor of my life”—the table itself becomes a disciplinary arena. The father simultaneously performs two roles: domestic patriarch and submissive social subordinate. His control over Li Wan mirrors his subordination to his business superior, reflecting what Michel Foucault calls the isomorphism of power—the replication of disciplinary mechanisms across institutional levels.

Li Wan’s muted protests at the banquet further reveal what Foucault terms discursive exclusion (Foucault 1977, 177). Her “aphasia”⁸³ is not a lack of linguistic ability but a systematic exclusion from the arena of power. The incident with the fake Einstein reinforces this exclusion, as the father and stepmother’s coercive replacement of her beloved dog symbolizes the erasure of her emotional autonomy.

Sound in the banquet scene thus functions as semiotic power. The adults’ cyclical and formulaic dialogue forms a symbolic discourse of social hierarchy. The silencing of Li Wan’s voice signals the complete marginalization of the individual within the disciplinary system. The spatial environment amplifies this effect: the dining room’s acoustic reverberation

⁸² A business banquet, here known as a “Fanju” 饭局, is an event that is very common in China between businessmen, where they get together for a meal, and in the course of the meal they enter into a business co-operation.

⁸³ Aphasia in this context doesn’t mean that Li wan doesn’t have the ability to speak in a pathological sense, but rather that what she says doesn’t get anyone else’s attention or have any impact.

magnifies the adults' voices while suppressing the child's, creating an auditory architecture of domination.

This auditory-spatial complicity reappears in the film's climactic dog-meat scene. The adults—father, stepmother, grandparents, and “Uncle Liu”—occupy the center of the dining table, while Li Wan sits at the edge, her image compressed by shallow focus. The camera's composition—foregrounding the father's back, centering the girl, and blurring the background—symbolizes her psychological marginalization. When Uncle Liu offers her a piece of dog meat, she eats it tearfully under collective scrutiny. This act becomes a tragic symbol of submission, a visible confirmation of the internalized discipline of both family and society.

Chion distinguishes between diegetic sound (narrative space sound) and non-diegetic sound (external or commentary sound). In this scene, both types intertwine to produce a dense emotional texture. The diegetic sounds—the conversation, cutlery clatter, and ambient murmur—anchor the realism of the setting. Yet when Li Wan eats the meat, the soundtrack abruptly descends into absolute silence. This non-diegetic silence externalizes her inner agony. Chion notes that silence can break the audience's expectation of continuity, creating a shock that intensifies emotional engagement (Chion 1994, 45). Li Wan's submission, amplified by the oppressive silence, magnifies the tragedy of her voicelessness.

This interplay extends into what Chion calls trans-narrative spatial sound (Chion 1994, 72). When background music suddenly ceases, the audience's expectation collapses, heightening narrative tension. The contrast between foreground sounds (adult conversation) and background music (a subdued, melancholic score) is paralleled by the “framed composition” of the image: the vertical bars of the dining partition form a prison-like visual metaphor, while the soundtrack reinforces the psychological confinement. The soundscape thus becomes a narrative engine, transforming domestic space into a resonant chamber of power.

5.4.3 Resonant Space and Emotional Transmission

The nocturnal sequence in which Li Wan searches for Einstein encapsulates the film's fusion of sound, space, and emotion. The hand-held camera follows her breathless run through the narrow, dimly lit alleys of Xi'an. The shaking frame creates what Chion calls a breath effect (Chion 2009, 56)—an auditory illusion of physical exhaustion that pulls the spectator into the character's psychological vortex. The metal fences and barred windows lining the streets resemble a cage, evoking Foucault's concept of the “body under discipline”.

When Li Wan calls “Einstein” into the darkness, ambient sounds—distant barking, the scraping of a bicycle chain, the creaking of metal doors—form a complex polyphonic soundscape. Each layer contributes to what Pierre Schaeffer terms sound object montage (Schaeffer 1966, 89): the arrangement of discrete auditory fragments into a psychological narrative. Each bark momentarily revives her hope, only to be drowned out by mechanical noise. The metallic echo

of her collision with a trash bin fuses her physical pain with auditory trauma, turning sound into a visceral representation of fear.

The film's use of spatial acoustics is meticulous. In the narrow alley, her cries produce a pronounced echo—a “sound prison” (Chion 2009, 110). As she escapes onto an open street, the echo abruptly disappears, signaling a temporary release from both physical and psychological constraint. Yet when she mistakes another dog's bark for Einstein's, the sound orientation deliberately blurs, representing cognitive disorientation (Chion 2009, 134).

When Li Wan finally encounters the real Einstein, the film employs what may be termed acoustic negation: her whispered confession, “How afraid I am that it will recognize me,” fades into the sound of a missing-dog notice fluttering in the wind. The fading barks dissolve any sense of reunion, reinforcing the cruelty of her forced conformity. The overlapping sounds of her breath and her brother's dog-skinning lessons create an acoustic fold that merges temporal layers, exposing the continuity of trauma across time.

The film's final scene at the skating rink exemplifies the narrative function of sound in public space. Li Wan stands behind a glass guardrail, physically isolated from her younger brother, who struggles under the coach's supervision. The rink, as a site of public discipline, mirrors the earlier domestic spaces of repression. The guardrail serves both as a literal and metaphorical boundary—dividing not only the siblings but also the internalized and externalized dimensions of discipline.

The rink's ambient sounds—skates scraping the ice, the coach's sharp commands, the parents' conversations—compose a vivid yet oppressive soundscape. Each cry of the brother and each reprimand from the coach materialize discipline in acoustic form. The sharp hiss of blades on ice resembles a knife cutting through the air, evoking unease. The coach's voice, high-pitched and commanding, embodies authoritarian control, while the parents' idle chatter amplifies the sense of emotional neglect.

Strikingly, there is no dialogue between Li Wan and her brother. This deliberate omission, a narrative silence, becomes the most eloquent form of sound. It signifies not only emotional estrangement but also the learned stoicism that Foucault describes as the endpoint of disciplinary power—the internalization of control.

The background score, which first appeared in Li Wan's earlier encounter with Einstein, reappears here with heavier instrumentation. The continuity of the musical motif links Li Wan's trauma to her brother's current predicament. In the earlier scene, the melody was slow and piercing, conveying fragility and fear; in the rink sequence, it becomes slower and more muted, resonating like a tolling bell. This transformation not only maintains narrative coherence but also underscores the intergenerational transmission of discipline. Each musical variation echoes the burden of expectation that passes from Li Wan to her brother.

Finally, an almost imperceptible acousmatic intrusion—a shrill chirping sound when the brother queues for milk—breaks the scene’s calm. This noise, reminiscent of tinnitus, acts as an aural flashback to Li Wan’s earlier trauma. Chion emphasizes that such acousmatic sounds—unseen but deeply felt—can evoke psychological tension and link disparate temporalities (Chion 1994, 52). Here, the chirping bridges the brother’s discipline and Li Wan’s repressed memory, serving as an acoustic hinge that propels the narrative inward, from social commentary to psychological introspection.

Sound in “Einstein and Einstein” thus transcends accompaniment; it shapes perception, delineates space, and constructs emotion. Through silence, echo, and acousmatic intrusion, the film materializes discipline as an audible architecture, allowing the audience to hear, not merely see, the oppression that defines the characters’ world.

Through a systematic analysis of the sound design and spatial metaphors in “Einstein and Einstein”, this chapter demonstrates how the film constructs a profound allegory of adolescence in contemporary China through the innovative use of cinematic language. The study reveals that the film’s soundscape and spatial design form a subtle yet powerful intertextual relationship: the suppression of sound within domestic spaces and the sonic violence of urban environments converge to create an atmosphere of pervasive aural oppression. In contrast, Li Wan’s silence within the bedroom and her fleeting liberation in the planetarium open up a fissure of individual resistance within this network of control. This dialectical interaction between sound and space exemplifies Lefebvre’s theoretical proposition that “space is a product of social relations”, highlighting how spatial and acoustic structures simultaneously reflect and reproduce social hierarchies.

The film’s major innovation lies in its sound-centered narrative strategy. Drawing on Chion’s theory of “layers of sound,” it becomes clear that the filmmaker constructs a dynamic hierarchy of auditory power: from the physical suppression embodied in the father’s voice—exemplified by the vacuum-like silence following the slap scene—to the alienating noise of the urban streets, and finally to Li Wan’s wordless empathy for her brother in the ice rink. Through this progression, it articulates a complete narrative arc of growth and disillusionment, mediated through sound rather than dialogue. In doing so, the film transcends the conventions of mainstream youth cinema, which often rely heavily on verbal exposition, and instead pioneers a more experimental and affective mode of cinematic expression where emotion, resistance, and identity are conveyed through the texture of sound itself.

Taken together, the findings of this chapter reveal that sound and space in “Einstein and Einstein” are not merely narrative supports but active agents in the production of meaning. They construct a multilayered field of power and resistance, in which the auditory dimension becomes a key site for negotiating subjectivity and social control.

Chapter 6 Mirroring-Drifting in the Shadows: the Construction and Dissolution of Moral Configuration in “Dead End” 烈日灼心 (2015)

6.1 Introduction

Scenario

Seven years ago, a horrific murder case occurred in Xilong 西泠, Fujian Province, in which a family of five died on the same day in a villa, causing a great shock in public. However, as the years passed, the suspects Yang Zidao 杨自道, Xin Xiaofeng 辛小丰, and Chen Bijue 陈比觉 were still at large. Now, all three are living in Xiamen. Yang has become a cab driver. He works hard and is the most commended driver in the company, but he doesn't dare to fall in love and stands up for himself when he encounters a robbery. Xin joins the auxiliary police and becomes the most capable assistant to Sergeant Yiguchun 伊谷春. He fights against violence to protect the people, but he never wants to be promoted to senior officer, he lives a gloomy life with secrets, and habitually puts out burning cigarettes by twisting them with his left hand. Chen became disabled in the accident and lives in his relative's fishery with the girl "Weiba" 尾巴 whom they picked up from the crime scene. He does the most tiring work and has rich astronomical knowledge under his vulgar appearance.

Yi values Xin, a man with outstanding abilities, but he also has a keen sense of smell and this man has something to do with the murder case back in the day. In the meantime, Yang in an accident meets Yi's sister-Yi Guxia 伊谷夏, a frank, cunning, beautiful girl Yang loves at first sight, but is rejected, Yang here all sorts of behaviors are suspicious. The landlord has been eavesdropping, rummaging, and constantly making diagrams of the suspicious spots. Yi had chatted with his mentor to investigate the rape and extermination case, Xin did not even raise his head to look at him, Yi suspicion, quietly removed Xin's constantly self-worn fingerprints from the left hand, placed in his drawer. Yi's sister falls in love with Yang because of his accidental help. Xin goes to the Bar where gays gather and seems like has a Taiwanese boyfriend. Yi forces Xin to go to a family banquet, where his mentor inferentially recovers the rape and extermination case. Seeing Xin's reaction, Guxia is puzzled. She tries to lead her brother to believe that the three men were far away in Xiamen on August 19th and were gay, but this alerts him instead. She offers to go to Shenzhen with the three men, but they don't want to run away again.

A few days before Weiba's birthday, the landlord reported them to the police, and the two of them were arrested and executed by lethal injection. Weiba was adopted by Yi. The truth is that Xin raped the girl, she died of a heart attack, and the real murderer is someone else, and Xin, Yang, and Chen are just the so-called temporary accomplices of the murderer. At that time, the three insisted on returning to the scene to take "Weiba" away from the crime scene.

Cao Baoping's "Dead End" stands as a landmark in Chinese crime cinema, weaving psychological suspense with profound moral dilemmas. At the heart of this study lies Lin Niantong's Mirroring-Drifting Theory⁸⁴, a framework deeply rooted in classical Chinese aesthetics that examines cinema as a dynamic interplay between representation ("mirroring") and spatiotemporal fluidity ("drifting"). This theory proves particularly apt for analyzing the film's layered narrative, where reflective surfaces like glass and surveillance footage serve as literal mirrors distorting reality while exposing hidden truths about characters' dual identities. The film's nonlinear structure and haunting urban landscapes of Xiamen embody Lin's concept of "drifting" creating a disorienting yet revelatory viewing experience that compels audiences to navigate the characters' traumatic memories.

This analysis juxtaposes Mirroring-Drifting theory with Lacanian concepts of the Gaze and the Mirror Stage to expose the fluid construction and dissolution of the film's moral order. The interrogation scenes stage the operation of the Big Other, where characters confront fragmented selves under the symbolic order, shaping the narrative's ethical framing. Xin's redemption arc subverts the Mirror Stage, as he remains suspended between a criminal past and an emergent paternal identity, destabilizing any fixed moral position. These psychological tensions are embedded in the film's noir aesthetics. Shadow-saturated visuals, moral ambiguity, and decaying urban spaces produce a "moral heterotopia" where competing ethical codes collide. The Xiamen overpass scene crystallizes this dynamic: both setting and metaphor, the labyrinthine city mirrors fractured subjectivities while materializing the processes of mirroring and drifting within the film's unstable moral geography. Through this lens, form and theme jointly enact the continual configuration and deconfiguration of the film's moral world.

Yet "Dead End" ultimately transcends noir's characteristic fatalism through its engagement with a locally-configured, relationally-grounded ethics. Xin's ultimate sacrifice for Weiba embodies a configured principle analogous to *yi* (righteousness) understood as situational harmony rather than absolute morality, echoing the notion of "righteousness as the harmony of benefits" within this moral framework. This creates a profound tension with the judicial system's failure to address the trauma at the story's core – what Lacan would call the unrepresentable Real. Where the legal system (Lacan's symbolic order) collapses in the face of irreducible moral complexity, these configured relational ethics offer a narrative and affective path forward. The film's brilliance lies in this very synthesis: it employs noir's visual and narrative conventions while subverting its nihilistic underpinnings through a distinctly configured moral discourse that is deeply resonant within its cultural context.

This interdisciplinary approach yields significant insights about contemporary Chinese cinema's cultural position. By applying the Mirroring-Drifting Theory alongside Western

⁸⁴Mirroring-Drifting Theory (镜游理论), proposed by Hong Kong film scholar Lin Niantong, interprets cinema as a dynamic interplay between mirroring (reflection) and drifting (mobility). The screen acts as a "mirror" that reflects reality while allowing viewers to "drift" through layered 时空 (time-space), blending perception, memory, and imagination. Rooted in Daoist aesthetics, it frames film as a fluid, meditative journey where boundaries between subject/object and real/illusory dissolve, inviting self-reflection and cultural contemplation.

theoretical paradigms, the analysis avoids Eurocentric biases while demonstrating how global genres transform through local cultural lenses. The underwater rescue sequence, for example, becomes a microcosm of this theoretical synthesis – its spatial dynamics ("drifting") and identity revelations ("mirroring") coalesce into a powerful ethical statement. Ultimately, "Dead End" emerges as a cinematic heterotopia where noir aesthetics, psychoanalytic depth, and Confucian values collide, producing a uniquely Chinese meditation on justice, redemption, and the elusive nature of truth. The film's enduring power stems from this very ability to balance genre conventions with cultural specificity, offering both visceral thrills and profound philosophical engagement.

6.2 Mirroring-Drifting Theory and Interdisciplinary Interpretive Approaches

The essence of Lin Niantong's Mirroring-Drifting Theory finds remarkable resonance with the film "Dead End". Rooted in traditional Chinese visual poetics rather than mere "classical aesthetics", this theory deconstructs the dialectical relationship between mirroring and drifting within cinematic imagery. As will be shown in the following analysis, this interpretive framework demonstrates distinctive analytical power.

The dimension of "Mirror" entails three interrelated meanings. First is the physical mirror: Surveillance footage, glass, water reflection as mirror, iron fences in the police station, and other recurring visual motifs constitute what Foucault might call an "eye of discipline". When Xin faces the fence during interrogation, the over-shoulder camera framing positions the audience simultaneously as observer and observed, embodying Lin's assertion that "the mirror is not a mere reflection, but a field for the power game" (Lin 1991, 45–68). Second, the psychological mirror emerges as Xin enacts Lacanian *méconnaissance*⁸⁵ (Lacan 1977, 2) through his compulsive performance of police routines. Repeated close-ups of his hand-rubbing gesture function as bodily "symptoms" that break through linguistic defenses, affirming Lin's idea that "the body is the most honest" (Lin 1991, 85–102). Thirdly, the cultural mirror is dramatized through the parallel between Xin's execution and the adopted girl's fate, metaphorically exposing the tension between moral emotion and legal order in Chinese society. As Lin notes, "the mirror image of Chinese cinema is always hovering between the gap of Confucian ethics and modernity" (Lin 1991, 112).

The notion of "Drifting" unfolds along spatial and temporal dimensions. In spatial terms, the long tracking shot along Xiamen Island Road—with its wide 2.35:1 aspect ratio and gliding coastline—echoes the visual logic of Song Dynasty landscape painting, the *Yi Bu Huan Jing*

⁸⁵ Lacan's "*méconnaissance*" means "misrecognition", which refers to the stage of mirroring in which the individual mistakes the image in the mirror for the real self, forming an idealized self-image. This process of misrecognition not only shapes subjectivity, but also leads to the deviation of self-perception from the real self due to unconscious intervention and social symbolism.

(“shifting steps and changing scenery”)⁸⁶ principle (Guo 2018, 156–163). Temporally, the film’s disjointed flashbacks invite the audience to reconstruct narrative time and space like assembling a fragmented puzzle. Lin emphasizes that “the tense of Chinese cinema is always present, even in someone’s memories” (Lin 1991, 129–143).

To complement this aesthetic and psychological inquiry, Lacanian psychoanalysis functions not as a deepening of Mirroring-Drifting theory, but as an independent yet parallel framework. It enriches the overall reading by specifically illuminating the mechanisms of subject formation, gaze, and trauma operating beneath the film’s narrative surface. The “mirror stage” clarifies Xin’s identity formation as a process of constructing the self through the Other (Lacan 2006, 75–81). The bathroom mirror scene, where Xin practices saluting before his distorted reflection, visually stages this instability. Meanwhile, Lacan’s concept of the Gaze exposes the film’s power dynamics: Yi’s numerous direct looks at the camera—especially during interrogation—enact a visual violence that aligns with Lacan’s notion that “the gaze precedes the observation” (Lacan 1981, 67–78). The shift of surveillance footage into subjective viewpoints further generates a nested structure of gazes. Finally, the Real manifests through the repeated reconstruction of the reservoir murder scene. Each iteration adds new fragments, affirming that “trauma is the ever-repeating absence” (Lacan 2014, 53–58). The eventual revelation from Xin’s subjective perspective introduces a profound ethical dilemma of memory and guilt.

The film’s aesthetic language also aligns with and transcends Film Noir traditions, forming a natural continuation of this psychoanalytic reading. Noir’s chiaroscuro lighting and moral ambiguity find a clear echo here: the rooftop confrontation between Xin and Yi visually divides their faces into light and shadow, “writing moral ambiguity with light” (Schrader 1972, 118). Yet the film significantly departs from conventional Noir structure. Instead of the genre’s retrospective narration, it adopts progressive revelation (notably in the forensic report sequence from 01:12:20–01:30:15). Characterization also subverts the classic “Detective–Femme Fatale” motif, replacing it with a mirrored “cop–criminal” symbiosis. The film concludes not in nihilism but in a Confucian ethical resolution—the principle of *She Sheng Qu Yi* (sacrificing one’s life for righteousness)⁸⁷ (Naremore 2008, 176–189).

Moral Configuration localizes the film’s ethical discourse through its narrative construction. The principle analogous to *Ren* (benevolence) is configured within Xin’s act of raising abandoned children, while the film deliberately blurs his motivations—whether grounded in

⁸⁶ 移步换景. Guo Xi 郭熙, a painter from the Northern Song Dynasty 北宋, put forward the creative concept of “moving step by step, looking from all sides” 步步移, 面面看 in his *Linquan Gaozhi* 林泉高致 advocating the organization of the picture from a dynamic perspective, breaking through the limitations of a single point of view. The theory builds spatial hierarchy through the “Three Distant Methods” 三远法 (high 高远, deep 深远, and flat 平远) so that the viewer is guided by the picture to create a sense of visual movement.

⁸⁷ In Chinese it written as 舍生取义, it means to uphold justice and defend morality, someone is willing to give up his life. Derived from *Meng Zi* 孟子 “Life is what I desire; righteousness is also what I desire. I can’t have both so I will give up my life for righteousness” 生, 亦我所欲也; 义, 亦我所欲也。二者不可得兼, 舍生而取义者也。

genuine compassion or self-atonement. This ambiguity reflects how moral configuration operates not as fixed virtue, but as a narrative field of possible meanings, recalling the interpretive stance: “Observe the reason for it, observe the security of it”⁸⁸ (*Analects – For Political Affairs*) (Zhu Xi 2010, 72). Similarly, the tension between *Yi* and *Li* (“righteousness and profit”)⁸⁹ is dramatized through Yang’s conflicting moral choices as a taxi driver—refusing material gain yet engaging in crime—mirroring the dialectic “a righteous man is for righteousness, and a villain is for profit”⁹⁰ (*Li Ren, The Analects of Confucius*) (Ames, R. T. 1998 & Rosemont, H. 1998, 92). Finally, the reinterpretation of the “Way of Warrior Power”⁹¹ (*Jing Quan Zhi Dao*) emerges in Yi’s concealment of evidence: the law enforcer’s violation of law achieves paradoxical legitimacy within Zhu Xi’s framework that “power is the change of the way”⁹² (*Zhuzi Yulei*, vol. 37) (Chen Lai 2014, 335–341). Through these examples, the film’s moral configuration does not merely reflect an external ethical system, but actively constructs—and interrogates—its own normative world through layered narrative choices.

Taken together, these four frameworks—Mirroring-Drifting, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Film Noir, and narrative-driven moral configuration⁹³—complement one another across spatial, temporal, and ethical dimensions. Mirroring-Drifting situates the cityscape aesthetically; Lacan elucidates the psyche’s temporal fractures; Film Noir establishes moral rhythm and tension; and narrative-driven moral configuration restores depth to the film’s ethical discourse through its own narrative logic. Collectively, they reveal the polyphonic richness of “Dead End”, exemplifying David Bordwell’s insight that “great films always leave multiple interpretive entrances” (Bordwell 2008, 203).

⁸⁸ 观其所以，观其所由，察其所安. This phrase, from the *Analects of Confucius* 论语·为政, is a methodology proposed by Confucius to recognize a person’s character. The meaning is: to observe a person’s behavioral motives, path of experience, and inner peace, to fully understand his or her character and aspirations.

⁸⁹ 义利之辨. It originated from Confucianism in ancient China and was first proposed by Confucius, whose classic source is the statement in the *Analects of Confucius – Liren* 论语·里仁. This proposition explores the relationship between moral principles (righteousness) and material interests (profit) and has become one of the main themes of Confucian ethics.

⁹⁰ 君子喻于义，小人喻于利. It is from the *Analects of Confucius – Liren* 论语·里仁, meaning that the Righteous Man understands morality and righteousness, while the Villain seeks only profit. This sentence emphasizing the opposition between moral pursuits and utilitarianism.

⁹¹ 经权之道. It comes from the Confucian classics and refers to the unity of principle (*Jing* 经) and flexibility (*Quan* 权) in dealing with affairs. “Jing” is the unchanging principle, and “Quan” is the expedient adaptation, the two complement each other, reflecting the dialectical wisdom of principle and flexibility.

⁹² 权者，道之变. It is from *Zhuzi Yulei* 朱子语类 which means that “Quan” 权 is the flexible application of “Dao” 道 (the Way) in special situations. Zhu Xi 朱熹 emphasized that “Jing” 经 is the eternal principle, and “Quan” 权 is the expedient adaptation, and the two are complementary to each other, reflecting the dialectical wisdom of Confucianism, i.e., the unity of adherence to principle and flexible response.

⁹³ Narrative-Driven Moral Configuration is an original framework for analyzing filmic moral discourse. Rather than locating ethics in static cultural systems (e.g., “Confucian ethics”), it examines how narrative form—perspective, temporality, rhythm, and information control—actively constructs and destabilizes a film’s internal moral order. Grounded in cinema’s formal and narrative ontology and aligned with critical formalism, it serves as a mid-level integrative tool that engages cognitive narratology, psychoanalysis, and spatial politics while focusing on how moral worlds emerge and dissolve through storytelling.

6.3 "Mirroring" in "Dead End"

Mirrors have always been a highly symbolic element in the narrative of film art. It can not only present the refraction and reflection of light and shadow in physical form, building a unique spatial aesthetic, but also serve as a psychological and cultural metaphor, carrying the artist's thoughts on humanity, society, and other deep-seated issues. The film "Dead End" skillfully utilizes mirror imagery to create an intricate and meaningful narrative work.

In this film, "mirror" is not a one-dimensional existence, but presents rich connotations of physical, psychological, and cultural dimensions, constituting a multi-layered phenomenon of "mirror reflection". From the physical mirror, the use of a surveillance screen and glass reflection creates a tense and depressing atmosphere, Foucault's perspective of power also reveals the subtle relationship between gazing and being gazed at in the power structure, which enables the audience to intuitively feel the character's survival under the surveillance system. At the level of psychological mirror, Lacan's theory of "Others" provides a different perspective for interpreting the characters. Xin's split and struggle for identity is fully revealed in his interaction with Yi, the "Mirror of Morality". Yi is like a mirror inside Xin, reflecting his conflict between morality and desire, truth and pretense, triggering the audience to think about the complexity of humanity. The mirror of culture focuses on the influence of the Confucian "Shame Culture"⁹⁴ on the character's behavior. This cultural gene, deeply imprinted in their souls, drives their choices and actions, laying the groundwork for the ethical conflict in the redemption scene at the end. When we see the characters making difficult choices between morality and emotion, between self and others, we also feel the powerful shaping of individual destiny by cultural power.

Through the profound analysis of the "Mirror Reflection" phenomenon in the film, we can understand the narrative technique and theme expression more thoroughly, and gain an insight into the complex intertwining of society, psychology, and culture, and appreciate the charming of the film art as the spiritual mirror image of humankind.

6.3.1 The Mirror of Power: Discipline, the Gaze, and Subject Formation in the Interrogation Space

The film constructs a complex system of power discipline and visualization, among which the scene in the interrogation room is very representative. Through the unique two-camera dispatch, the scene profoundly interprets Foucault's "Panopticism" and Lacan's "Gaze" from the perspectives of politics, showing the complex interaction between power and the subject in visual space.

⁹⁴ 耻感文化 This is a value system centered on "the awareness of shame" within Confucianism. It underscores that individuals should possess a sense of shame, regulate their conduct with moral norms, deem the "shameless" as inhuman, and advocate achieving harmony between individual self-cultivation and social order through self-reflection and external moral enlightenment.

The interrogation room setting appears to be a dimly lit room with vertical iron bars in the foreground, indicating a confined area. The walls are plain and unadorned, suggesting a utilitarian space with minimal decoration. Light filters in through a small, barred window in the background, casting muted shadows and creating a subdued atmosphere. The room contains basic institutional furniture, including a simple metal chair. The lighting is low and directional, contributing to a stark, somber mood. Overall, the environment feels austere, controlled, and functional, designed for authority and confinement rather than comfort or aesthetics.



Figure 6.3.1



Figure 6.3.2



Figure 6.3.3

Xin was brought into the interrogation room by a police officer, with a yellow vest-style prison uniform, his eyes revealing nervousness and uneasiness. His hands unconsciously clenched and unclenched, and his footsteps were somewhat hesitant, the shackles making a shrill sound as he walked (Figure 6.3.1). The police officer brought him to the interrogation table and signaled him to sit. Xin slowly sat down on the chair, his body slightly leaning forward, his hands resting on his knees, his gaze lowered, not daring to meet the police officer's eyes, the dim light casting the shadow of the iron fence onto him (Figure 6.3.2). The policeman in charge of the interrogation, Yi (Figure 6.3.3), stood outside the iron fence, his expression was serious, and his eyes were sharp, he panicked, fished out a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, drew one out, slowly lit it, inhaled deeply, sighed, exhaled the smoke, and then handed the cigarettes to Xin, who was another side of the fence. Xin's hands were handcuffed, so he could only lean his entire body forward, at his neck to reach the cigarette, and after taking a long drag, he also sighed.

Finally, Yi opened his mouth and said: it's a pity! You are indeed good material to be a police officer. Did you start that (homosexuality) in middle school? No, you're not at all! He then follows up with questions about the purpose of acting with the Taiwanese man, as well as admitting that Xin's disguise was all very successful. In the face of this series of follow-up questions, Xin gave no response, and his silence and bitter smiles made this interrogation breathless. When the topic finally came to the adopted little girl "Weiba", Xin finally opened his mouth, he said he wanted to wait to gather enough money to help the girl finish the operation, and then turn himself in. He then asks and answers questions about whether he is a good father. The two men understand each other's position in the tossing and turning words. It was an atypical interrogation.

In this scene, the filmmaker constructs a complex narrative space through multiple visual symbols. When Xin enters the interrogation room in his yellow prison uniform, the image adopts an overhead perspective, placing him in a frame structure made of iron bars, a composition that directly echoes the oppressive nature of Lacan's theory of "Symbolic Order". The sound design reinforces his physical presence as an Object of Gaze, as the shackles make a shrill noise with each step. In front of the interrogation table, Xin's body language presents a typical defensive posture: his body is leaning forward at 45 degrees, his hands are clenched on his knees, and his gaze always avoids direct contact with the police. This posture is mirrored by Yi's standing posture - Yi remains upright, and the slow-motion close-up of the cigarette burning between his fingers suggests his control of power as the "Other". When Yi hands him a cigarette, Xin has to complete the action with his neck stretched forward in a humiliating gesture, which is captured in close-up, and the shadow of the iron bars isolating them is cast on his prison uniform, forming a visual metaphor of stripes.

According to Lacan, the mirror stage marks a critical moment when the subject's identity emerges through a misrecognition of its own image in the mirror—what Lacan calls the other (Lacan 1977, 1–7). This other belongs to the Imaginary order, where the ego is formed through an identification with a specular double, producing the illusion of a coherent self. Yet this self-image is a semblance, an illusion of unity masking internal division.

By contrast, the Other belongs to the Symbolic order, representing language, law, and social discourse—the structures through which the subject is spoken and recognized. As Lacan explains, “the subject is constituted at the intersection of these two forms of alterity”: the other concerns the Imaginary drama of the ego and its rivalrous doubles, while the Other concerns the Symbolic drama of the unconscious subject, who is governed by a law and a language it did not create. The distinction is therefore not one of scale but of ontology—the other is a semblance, while the Other is the Symbolic Order itself, the ultimate ground of human experience (Lacan 1977, 5–7).

In the interrogation scene, this dual alterity is vividly visualized. The iron fence functions as the gaze of the Other—a symbolic manifestation of social law and surveillance—dividing Xin's body and identity into fragmented segments. The bars are not merely physical; they

represent the Other's structuring power, cutting through Xin's Imaginary coherence. The Other's gaze objectifies him within the Symbolic order, positioning him as the subject under judgment, while his own reflection—his fear, his trembling self—belongs to the other, the Imaginary self-image now shattered under the pressure of the Symbolic gaze (Lacan 1977, 3–6).

When Yi says, "It's a pity! You're excellent material to be a policeman" (真可惜, 你是个当警察的好苗子), the camera shifts to Xin's close-up, capturing his visible anxiety. This moment dramatizes the conflict between his ideal ego—the Imaginary self he aspires to maintain before the other—and his ego ideal, which is governed by the Other's expectations. His strained expression marks the subject's struggle to reconcile two incompatible orders: the self he imagines, and the self demanded by the Symbolic law embodied in Yi's authority.

The second moment, when Yi asserts, "You're not gay at all" (你根本就不是 GAY), represents the complete collapse of Xin's pseudo-self. The Other's voice—carrying the full force of social and moral discourse—strips away his performative identity. At this instant, the interplay of light and shadow cast through the bars visually encodes his fragmentation: streaks of illumination and darkness traverse his face, signifying the disintegration of his Imaginary unity beneath the Symbolic judgment. The iron bars thus operate as both literal boundaries and metaphors of psychic division—the Other's law slicing through the Imaginary other.

Thus, Xin's silence and bitter smile signify his submission to the Other's desire: a futile attempt to sustain coherence within an order that continually divides him. His identity does not exist as an autonomous essence but is perpetually constituted at the intersection of the other (his Imaginary self-image) and the Other (the Symbolic field of law, language, and desire). The interrogation room, framed by bars and shadow, becomes the spatial articulation of this Lacanian intersection—where the subject's being is always seen, spoken, and fractured by the Other.

Laura Mulvey's theory of the "male gaze" (Mulvey 1975, 19) is visualized in this scene as a double gaze structure: Yi, as a law enforcer, gazes on behalf of the absolute authority in the legal order; while Xin gazes back through the gap in the iron fence implies a resistance to the identity of the "gazed". When Xin mentions the adopted girl "Weiba", the scene suddenly becomes unusually quiet, Xin's breathing becomes prominent, it forms a sound-picture counterpoint to the silence of the interrogation room, imagery that suggests that his "fatherly identity" is an implicit resistance to the legal order. In the questioning of his identity as a "good father", Xin's answer triggers a brief moment of silence from Yi. At this point, the scene is shot from a low angle, with Yi's police badge forming a halo in the backlight, symbolizing his loosening of authority as the "Great Other".

At the end of the interrogation, Xin says, "I'll turn myself in after I've collected enough money to help the girl get an operation" 我本打算凑够了尾巴的手术费就自首, and this declaration is presented as a double narrative in the image: on the one hand, the shadow of the iron fence

gradually shortens as the daylight moves, symbolizing the slow recovery of his subjectivity; on the other hand, the iron fence separating the two men is in the camera's defocus, implying the failure of the legal discourse. When Yi finally says, "You won the game" 你赢了, the scene is slowly drawn out in a long take, bringing them into the fence's frame structure. This composition breaks the traditional dichotomy of the interrogation scene, suggesting the dynamic balance between law and humanity in extreme situations. At the end of the scene, the siren from the next scene enters before the picture shows, and Xin's tired face merges with the siren, symbolizing his temporary liberation as the "subject".

This scene transforms the Mirror Stage, the Gaze Mechanism, and the Symbolic Order in Lacan's theory into a perceptible on-screen experience through the subtle interplay of visual symbols. Imagery such as iron fences, prison uniforms, and handcuffs constitute a multilayered referential network, the interaction between Xin and Yi, the tension between the law's authority and humanity's struggle is developed to the extreme. This visualization not only deepens the philosophical dimension of the film but also reveals the eternal dilemma of individual identity in modern society through the screen as a mirror.

The iron fence, as a spatial dividing element, is symbolic in the film. It not only physically separates this room, but also divides the violator's and enforcer's space in terms of power dimension. The area where Xin is located is defined as a violator's space because it is surrounded by an iron fence, and his behavior is strictly regulated; whereas the area where the police are located is an enforcer's space, which has the power to interrogate and judge Xin. This spatial division reflects the unequal and unidirectional power, Schrader (1972) points out, that spatial materiality is the basis for power operation. Lefebvre (Lefebvre 1974, 33) further elaborates on how space serves as a material container for power relations, emphasizing the foundational role of spatial divisions in the power structure. Specifically, the physical presence of the iron fence reinforces the police's surveillance and control over Xin. Xin's behaviors in that space, such as physical gestures and verbal expressions, are strictly scrutinized by the police. This spatial division restricts Xin's freedom, but it also psychologically oppresses him and puts him in tension and anxiety. The police have absolute power to interrogate and judge Xin on the other side of the fence, and the unidirectionality of this power puts Xin in a vulnerable position during the interrogation. Through the Panopticism Theory, Foucault (Foucault 1975, 195) reveals how space is designed as a tool for power discipline, emphasizing the role of spatial structure in shaping individual behavior.

The interrogation room is a place where the police exercise power, it is a centralized symbol of power. Its clear boundaries and rules make the interrogation process a ritual for power disciplining. In this space, the police monitor and judge Xin in all aspects through questioning and observation. This kind of monitoring and judgment is based on legal procedures and contains the will and tendency of power. The layout of the interrogation room also reflects the power's asymmetry. The police stand in the righteous position and have control over the interrogation process, while Xin sits on the opposite side, in the position of being interrogated and judged. This reinforces the police's authority and Xin's vulnerability, which makes the

interrogation process a power demonstration and disciplining process. Soja points out that space is not only a place of physical existence but also an embodiment of power relations (Soja 1996, 78) , where the spatial layout reflects the power structure's asymmetry.

In this film, *Astropolitica* has a profound effect on the characters' destinies. Xin is plunged into the violator's space because of his crime, his fate is controlled by authority from then on. He tries to get rid of this bondage through self-redemption, but in the end, he still cannot escape. This *Astropolitica* operation makes him take on a tragic color. Specifically, Xin constantly seeks opportunities for self-redemption during his escape. His behaviors such as taking care of the adopted girl and doing good deeds are attempts to make up for his past crimes through efforts at the moral level. However, under the operation of *Astropolitica*, these efforts pale in comparison. He is never able to escape the negative label of being a criminal, and continues to be captured and eventually tried. Foucault has pointed out that power shapes the fate of individuals through spatial regulation, and individuals often appear powerless in the space of power (Foucault 1975, 201).

Astropolitica affects the individual's destiny and is closely related to the social order. The police, as the guardians of the law-abiding space, maintain the social order by exercising their power to stabilize it. While Xin and others, as representatives in the law-breaking space, their existence and behavior threaten the social order. Therefore, the police hunting and sanctioning them is not only a power struggle at the individual level but also an inevitable requirement for the social order to be maintained. Specifically, the police's interrogation and judgment is the execution of legal procedures, it is also the social order maintenance. By interrogating and sanctioning, the police send a clear signal to society: any violations against the law and social norms will be severely sanctioned. Through the lens of *Astropolitica*, this film insightfully reveals the mechanisms and implications of power operations. It reminds us that space is not only a place of physical existence but also an important carrier for power operation. Under its operation, the individual's fate and social order are profoundly affected. Therefore, we should deeply reflect on and scrutinize this concept and space to seek a more rational way.

6.3.2 psychological Mirror⁹⁵: Xin Xiaofeng's Identity Crisis

In Lin Niantong's Mirroring-Drifting Theory, the "psychological Mirror" (心理之镜) refers to the cinematic process through which a film visualizes characters' inner emotions and psychological states, allowing audiences to experience empathy through aesthetic reflection. Unlike Lacan's mirror, which addresses the philosophical question "Who am I?" and reveals identity as a fictional and alienated construct within an epistemological and tragic model (Lacan 1977, 1-7), Lin's mirror asks "How does he or she feel?"—an aesthetic inquiry seeking harmony and emotional understanding. The two mirrors thus differ in ontology and purpose: Lacan's emphasizes misrecognition and the fragmentation of the self within the Symbolic order,

⁹⁵ Lin Niantong, in *Chinese Film Aesthetics*, conceptualizes the "psychological mirror" as the immersive aesthetic experience wherein the audience's mind merges with the cinematic scene, achieving a state of subject-object fusion. Constituted through lyrical imagery and narrative, it represents the ultimate realm of "mirroring-drifting"—a spiritual wandering triggered by and transcending the "physical mirror".

while Lin's transforms images into expressive media of empathy that reveal rather than conceal. In *Dead End*, Xin's identity crisis—visually conveyed through fractured light and shadow—illustrates how the "Mirror of Psychology" translates internal conflict into visible emotion, shifting interpretation from alienation to resonance, and enabling audiences to grasp his inner turmoil through aesthetic empathy rather than psychoanalytic distance.

After committing his crimes, Xin is overwhelmed by guilt. The "Psychological Mirror" reflects his deep reflection and self-condemnation of his behavior. In the last seven years, although he has tried to be a good person for his past crimes by doing good deeds, the sinful shadow always follows him. For example, after he becomes a deputy policeman, he excels in his duties and apprehends many criminals, however, this does not eliminate the fear and anxiety in him. When he confronts his boss Yi, he always deliberately avoids the past incidents, fearing that his crimes will be revealed. This psychological attitude reflects his distorted identity, as he is unable to face up to his past and accept his identity as a criminal. From the perspective of the "Mirror of Psychology", his inner world is full of contradictions and struggles. On the one hand, he longs to be a new man and gain social acceptance; on the other hand, he is unable to get rid of the bondage of guilt and is plunged into the abyss of self-denial. This identity distortion makes him extremely sensitive and fragile, and he is afraid of establishing too close relationships with others and revealing his secrets. For example, his feelings towards his adopted daughter, Weiba, are complex and contradictory; he wants to give her love and care, but he is also afraid of bringing her harm due to his criminal behavior.

In the process of self-redemption, Xin's "psychological mirror " reflects his desire for redemption and his confusion about his identity. He adopted the little girl, hoping to alleviate his guilt by taking care of her. Unfortunately, this redemptive act does not provide him with recognition of his identity. He is always in a state of ambivalence when confronted with his crime. He hopes that the law will give him a fair trial and make him pay for his crimes; he also fears the sanction of the law to lose his present life and the people he loves. For example, in the film, Xin struggles when he faces Yi's investigation. On the one hand, he wants to confess his crime to Yi and gain relief; on the other hand, he is worried that he will lose everything if he confesses. This identity confusion makes him struggle all the time. In his interactions with Yi, they constantly test each other's boundaries, trying to find a way to atone for his sins and preserve the status quo.

When the law finally tips the scales in favor of justice, Xin's "psychological mirror" reflects the majesty of the law and the ending of his identity. When Xin is surrounded by the police, he faces the sanctions of the law. At this point, his internal world reaches the brink of collapse. He realizes that he cannot escape from justice for his crimes and that his identity questioning will be terminated at this moment. When confronted with death, Xin's life experience appears in his "Psychological Mirror". He remembers the mistakes he has made and the happy times he had with Weiba. At last, he chooses to accept the consequences. From the perspective of the "Psychological Mirror ", Xin's psychological change when facing the sanctions, by then he has completed the identity verification. He no longer runs away from his punishment, instead, he

bravely assumes his responsibility. This change gives him peace and shows the complexity and versatility of humanity.

The root of Xin's identity crisis lies in his criminal behavior and society's moral judgment towards crimes. In the traditional perspective, crime is an unforgivable thing, violators will be forever reviled by society and sanctioned by the law. After committing his crime, Xin can't escape the social condemnations, his heart is always tormented by the guilt. Moreover, society's labeling of crimes makes it harder to reintegrate into society and obtain a new identity. In addition, Xin's self-perception is also problematic. He can't perceive his past and present correctly and lacks a proper evaluation of his behavior. In the self-redemption, although he tries to do good deeds, he never forgives himself. This deviation in self-perception leads him to be confused and struggling with identity recognition.

By analyzing Xin through the lens of the "psychological mirror", we can see the connotation of his identity crisis. Xin's psychological mirror after the crime reflects the guilt and the identity distortion. His psychological mirror in self-redemption illuminates the desire for redemption and identity confusion. His psychological mirror reveals the majesty of the law and the end of his identity when confronted with sanctions. His identity crisis stems from various factors such as criminal behavior, social and moral judgment, and self-cognitive deviation. Lin Niantong's Mirroring-Drifting Theory provides a different perspective to understand the character and his psychology. This concept enables us to penetrate the character's heart to feel his emotions and struggles. Through analyzing Xin's identity crisis, we can better understand the theme and connotation of the film, meanwhile, we can think more deeply about humanity, morality, and law.

6.3.3 The Culture Mirror⁹⁶: Reflections of Law, Humanity and Narrative Moral Construction

This subsection utilizes the conceptual lens of the "Cultural Mirror," derived from Lin Niantong's Mirroring-Drifting Theory, and integrates the analytical framework of Narrative-Driven Moral Configuration to examine the refraction of jurisprudence and humanity within the film across three dimensions: the mirror of justice, the mirror of ethics, and the mirror of history, thereby facilitating a dialogue on values.

Within the film, the law is presented as a form of obligatory cultivation that restrains human evil while also permitting human goodness. From the perspective of Narrative-Driven Moral Configuration, law and humanity are not positioned in complete opposition. The narrative constructs a system where concepts analogous to traditional virtues such as "Benevolence"

⁹⁶ As an extension of Lin Niantong's mirroring-drifting theory, the "cultural mirror" designates the cinematic capacity to reflect and transmit the foundational values, collective psyche, and aesthetic traditions of a cultural community. It operates through the "physical mirror" and "psychological mirror," transforming the screen into a site where cultural memory and identity are projected, negotiated, and preserved.

(*Ren*) and “Rites” (*Li*)⁹⁷ function as internal norms governing social order and relational duties. These narratively configured norms share law’s orienting function, aiming to guide conduct toward perceived goodness. However, the narrative also rigorously explores the rigidity of codified law as a modern, compulsory norm. The three protagonists have lived in obscurity since their tragic crime seven years prior. Xin becomes a deputy police officer, attempting to atone by capturing thieves; Yang drives a taxi, performing acts of kindness yet remaining trapped by his past; and Chen, physically impaired, silently cares for their adopted daughter, Weiba. Despite their configurative efforts toward a “good” life, their foundational transgression remains. As their past resurfaces, they choose to face fatal consequences—an act that signifies a narrative-driven reverence for a configured moral order and a form of ultimate redemption. Within the narrative’s logic, the law functions as the configured yardstick for measuring good and evil. Even countless good deeds cannot erase a cardinal violation; the configured moral system demands accountability. According to the “Cultural Mirror,” the justice mirror reflects these configured legal norms, highlighting the complex relationship between static law and dynamic moral becoming. The law is presented as the cornerstone of social order, yet the narrative exposes its limitations and latency. While the trio did not intend murder, their cowardice and greed led to tragedy. The law’s judgment, based on objective facts, contrasts with their layered personal redemption, prompting deep reflection on how humanity can be recognized within a configured legal framework and how a balance between jurisprudence and human sentiment might be narratively achieved.

The film’s Narrative-Driven Moral Configuration emphasizes dynamic moral principles such as care, loyalty, and responsibility, exploring how characters strive toward goodness despite inherent flaws and external corruptions. The three men are archetypes configured in the boundary space between good and evil. Xin, as a deputy officer, consistently confronts danger—during one mission, his keen perception and cooperation with his supervisor, Yi, lead to subduing an armed suspect, configuring an image of bravery and justice. Yang repeatedly aids passengers; in one instance, he pursues robbers to recover a stolen item, enduring injury without hesitation. Although Chen feigns madness, his profound, sacrificial care for Weiba configures a pure form of paternal devotion. These actions constitute the narrative’s configuration of “goodness.”

From the perspective of the ethical mirror, their struggle configures a microcosm of the moral journey—a pursuit of moral integrity, familial duty, and social responsibility - *Xiu Shen Qi Jia Zhi Guo Ping Tian Xia*⁹⁸. They attempt to rectify their youthful wrongs, striving to “order the family” through caring for Weiba and seeking moral redemption. Yet, their past persists, and

⁹⁷ Confucian “Rites” 礼 is a system of behavioral norms, rules, and moral codes, originating from the institutionalization of the Duke Zhou's 周公 “Making Rituals and Music” 制礼作乐, and later developed by Confucius into the moral practice of “Being kind by restoring oneself to the rites” 克己复礼为仁. The essence is to standardize the social order and personal cultivation through rituals. This footnote is based on Confucius' *Analects* 论语 and the *Records of Rites* 礼记.

⁹⁸ 修身齐家治国平天下 This concept was systematically elaborated by the *Li Ji Da Xue* 礼记·大学 (The Book of Rites - The Great Learning), and its ideological origin can be traced back to Confucius, which was later organized and passed on by Zeng Zi 曾子 and his other disciples.

guilt remains ineradicable. The adopted daughter becomes their configured hope and redemptive motivation. Their love for her is a concentrated expression of configured goodness, standing in sharp contrast to their sin, thereby intensifying their tragic struggle. On the ethical level, they face a dual judgment: from their own configured conscience and from external social norms. They seek equilibrium but remain trapped within this configured dilemma.

The ethical mirror, modeled on the “Cultural Mirror,” reflects the configured social and moral landscape, revealing the profound confusion in human choice. We often struggle between configured good and evil amidst complex social environments and human weakness. While the narrative provides moral coordinates, its configuration also shows how difficult it is to consistently enact these principles in practice, demanding continuous negotiation and often resulting in tragedy.

The film is set within a specific historical period, mirroring societal transformations. Through the historical mirror, the destinies of the three men epitomize configured era-specific conflicts. Since the 1990s, China’s rapid development has ushered in shifting, diversifying values. Their impulsive adolescent crime and subsequent life on the run configure a narrative of straying paths, reflecting a social environment where individuals could falter without adequate guidance. Simultaneously, the film configures society’s growing concern for humanity within development. As societal consciousness of law and morality deepens, justice is served upon them, reflecting a configured historical progression. From the perspective of Narrative-Driven Moral Configuration, historical development within the story follows an internal narrative logic (Dao), intertwining social change with moral principles. Their tragic fates serve as a configured warning: amidst social flux, ethical boundaries must be upheld to achieve meaningful personal and social development.

Furthermore, the film touches on configured social realities such as urban-rural divides, police-criminal dynamics, and the corrupting influence of money and power. These elements, refracted through the historical mirror, reflect the complexity of social development. They clash and interact with configured notions akin to “harmony as precious” (He Wei Gui)⁹⁹ and “the value of righteousness and profitability” (Yi Li Guan)¹⁰⁰, compelling reflection on fairness, justice, and harmonious development. For instance, the urban-rural divide configures the struggle of Yang and Xin, migrants yearning to integrate into the city yet bound by their past. The complex, nuanced relationship between Yi and Xin configures not only institutional vigilance but also profound human recognition and emotional entanglement. The desperate

⁹⁹ 和为贵 This expression comes from the *Analects of Confucius* 论语·学而, one of the core values of Confucianism, which has profoundly influenced the traditional Chinese philosophy of life and social ethics. It emphasizes the importance to seek consensus in differences and to achieve a win-win situation in conflicts.

¹⁰⁰ 义利观 The doctrine is a central proposition of traditional Chinese ethical thought, and its intellectual origins can be traced back to the Confucian classics. It is mentioned in the *Analects of Confucius – Liren* 论语·里仁, *Mencius – Suzi* 孟子·告子上, and *Xunzi – Da Lue* 荀子·大略, and in the traditional context, it is mainly reflected in the cognition and trade-off between “Righteousness” 义 (moral righteousness and moral principles) and “Profit” 利 (interests and material pursuits). Confucianism emphasizes the importance of “righteousness over profit, and profit is controlled by righteousness” 重义轻利, 以义制利.

need for money to save Weiba configures the extreme pressures that can distort choice, highlighting the power of material forces within the configured moral landscape.

Through examining the justice mirror, ethical mirror, and historical mirror, we see how “Dead End” uses Narrative-Driven Moral Configuration to facilitate a complex dialogue on values concerning law and humanity. In terms of justice, the film affirms the configured authority and fairness of law while probing its intersection with human feeling, reminding us that law maintains order but must narratively grapple with human complexity. Ethically, it configures the struggle and potential for redemption between good and evil, promoting virtues like care and loyalty. Historically, it configures the impact of social change on the individual, urging reflection on the past to navigate contemporary problems rationally. The film reveals how law, morality, and history are intertwined within narrative configuration, collectively shaping human destiny. It invites us to draw configured wisdom from this interplay, continually exploring paths toward a more just and harmonious society.

6.3.4 The Narrative Function of the Mirror System

At the heart of the “mirror system” in “Dead End” lies the question of the mirrored body of the self—its dual existence as both external entity and inner identity, mediating between self and other/Other. In Lacanian terms, Xin’s reflected body under water materializes the perpetual oscillation between the Imaginary self—the coherent image perceived in the mirror—and the Symbolic Other—the gaze of law, morality, and social order that defines him (Lacan 1977, 1–7). Lin Niantong’s Mirroring-Drifting Theory extends this psychoanalytic tension into a cinematic language, transforming the mirror from a philosophical inquiry into identity (“Who am I?”) into an aesthetic exploration of interior feeling (“How does he feel?”). Thus, Xin’s mirrored body in water functions simultaneously as a self-reflective surface of consciousness and a projection screen of the Other’s moral and social gaze, forming a multidimensional mirror system that drives both the film’s narrative structure and its ethical sublimation.

On the physical level, the water body functions as a natural mirror that reflects and refracts, constructing a space where the external body and the inner psyche intersect. When Xin dives into deep water to carry out an arrest, the water becomes both a literal and metaphorical medium. It generates a visually enclosed space that externalizes his psychological state through refraction and reflection. The distorted silhouette of his body, shaped by ripples and refracted light, renders visible the fragmentation of the self between the Imaginary and Symbolic registers—the self as seen and the self being seen. This visual treatment aligns with Lin Niantong’s aesthetic of fluid motion, in which camera movement expresses psychological tension through spatial extensibility (Lin 1985, 47). The water mirror thus possesses dual properties: materially, it acts as a physical barrier hindering Xin’s movements; symbolically, it becomes a spiritual metaphor revealing his moral dilemma and the pressure of the Other’s gaze.

The absorption and scattering of light are reinforced as narrative symbols. As Xin dives, the light above penetrates the water, generating columns of light that project downward (Figure 6.3.4). The water body, functioning as a reflective field of the unconscious, materializes the

majesty of law and moral condemnation through visible structures of light and shadow. When Xin finally emerges, the stark contrast between brightness and darkness signifies his narrative trajectory from the abyss of sin toward moral redemption.



Figure 6.3.4

From a psychological perspective, Xin's near-death experience under water activates fragmented memory flashbacks—a “time fold” in narrative structure. Deprived of oxygen, his mind replays past crimes intercut with his present enforcement act, forming a mirrored contrast between guilt and justice. The flashback sequence—images of broken glass, flowing blood, and a distorted nude body—reconstructs the traumatic scene through surreal refracted imagery. These visual signifiers, mediated by the water mirror, merge past and present, reality and memory, in a double mirroring that externalizes the self's inner fracture. This sequence exemplifies Lin's notion that instinct toward death can be transformed into an aesthetic spectacle of life (Lin 1985, 89). Xin's distorted face underwater mirrors his firm expression in the present, manifesting the dialectic between the fragmented other (his former self) and the moral Other (the law).

According to the “Memory Reconstruction” theory, memories are not fixed but reconstructed under the influence of emotions and context (Schacter 1996, 112). Through water distortion and light dots, Xin's underwater struggle symbolizes this psychological reconstruction: his perception of the past is refracted by guilt, evasion, and idealization. When he faces the cage which traps him beneath the water, the rippling surface mirrors his fragmented conscience rather than recalling a specific memory. The transformation in light—from the darkness of the deep water to the faint gleam breaking through—visualizes his movement from inner corrosion to moral awakening. This visual and emotional oscillation functions as a psychological defense mechanism, externalizing Xin's unconscious attempt to reclaim moral significance through the aesthetic reconstruction of self rather than through linear recollection.

From a cultural perspective, Xin's self-sacrificial act embodies a moral proposition akin to "sacrificing one's life for righteousness" (*Sha Shen Cheng Ren*)¹⁰¹ as it has been narratively configured. The water mirror here elevates personal salvation into a collectively configured moral paradigm. As Xin's body sinks, the upward tilt of his face toward the light evokes a narrative logic in which moral truth, once grasped, legitimizes ultimate sacrifice. The water thus becomes a projection vessel for the film's moral configuration, sublimating the individual act of redemption into a symbolic moral construct. When Xin is pulled out by his colleague (Figure 6.3.5), the dynamic refraction of water reduces his outline to a configured emblem of virtue, transforming bodily suffering into an emblem of moral transcendence.



Figure 6.3.5

The mirroring of law and morality establishes a dialectical game in which Xin's underwater entrapment challenges the majesty of legal authority. While he struggles beneath the surface, Yi's anxious reflection appears on the rippling water—visually enacting the mirroring contest between law as the Symbolic Other and morality as the Imaginary self's yearning for redemption. This echoes Plato's proposition in *The Republic* regarding the eternal tension between rational law and humane virtue (Plato 380 BCE/2000, 517). The water's reflective surface becomes a negotiation arena where Xin's individual choice is scrutinized within a socio-ethical framework. Consistent with Biddle's theory of "Role Conflict" (Biddle 1979, 214), Xin's dual identity as both policeman (law enforcer) and criminal (moral transgressor) produces visual and ethical complexity, rendered visible through the refraction of water.

The folding of time and space intensifies narrative tension. The reflective properties of water conflate past, present, and future into a co-temporal continuum: the remembered crime, the

¹⁰¹ 杀身成仁 This term comes from *the Analects of Confucius - Wei Ling Gong* 论语·卫灵公, which refers to sacrificing one's life for the sake of justice or lofty ideals, stressing that at critical moments, individuals should transcend their instinctive attachment to life, and defend justice, safeguard the truth, and practice moral principles at the cost of their lives, which is a kind of noble spiritual realm and pursuit of values.

redemptive arrest, and the impending legal judgment coexist through the interplay of light and shadow. This narrative device exemplifies Lin's principle of "Multiple Spatial-Temporal Intertwining" (Lin 1985, 121). Xin's blurred and re-clarified body contours under water symbolize his moral duality—both sinner and savior. This imagery resonates with Sartre's existential notion of "free choice", wherein the individual must assume responsibility for moral action even amid ambiguity (Sartre 1943/2003, 45). The water surface thus becomes a figurative arena of ethical decision, transforming inner struggle into a configured site of moral reflection.

When Xin is finally lifted from the water, the refracting current encircles his body with a luminous halo, evoking a configured sense of "moral unity and transcendence" (*Tian Ren He Yi*)¹⁰². This closing image sublimates his individual redemption into a universal moral ideal. Through the aesthetic of the sublime, as Kant defines it, the spectacle of Xin's act evokes an emotion that transcends fear and admiration, elevating the spectator's moral awareness (Kant 1790/2000, 57). The mirror system—material, psychological, and cultural—thus converges to transform Xin's bodily struggle into a visual parable of self and Other, guilt and redemption, law and humanity.

6.4 "Drifting" as Noir and Narrative-Driven Moral Configuration

The film "Dead End" constructs an aesthetic world of tension through its distinctive narrative structure and ethical depth. When Xin leaps from the rooftop during the confrontation, a sequence that synthesizes the visual grammar of Film Noir with philosophical connotations of moral reckoning, it aptly encapsulates the film's dialectical relationship between genre convention and cultural-specific narrative construction. Traditional studies of Film Noir often focus on its fatalistic and existential anxieties within a Western context, seldom noting Cao Baoping's act of cultural transcoding in this work—he has implanted the chronotope of Film Noir into a soil rich with locally configured moral logic, from which a unique narrative form grows. This creative transformation calls for a renewed theoretical framework: Lin Niantong's Mirroring-Drifting Theory offers a key to deciphering this hybrid phenomenon, and its concept of Drifting proves particularly apt for analyzing the film's innovations in the dimensions of Spatial Dispatch, Temporal Structure, and Moral Logic.

In the spatial dimension, the city of Xiamen is deconstructed as a Foucault-inspired heterotopia—the police station, the rooftop, and the rented rooms are no longer merely physical settings, but arenas where power relations and configured ethical choices intersect. This spatial politics not only continues Film Noir's tradition of critiquing modern space but also infuses it with a moral-configurative spatial gaze, one that might be described as "the mind-constructed

¹⁰² 天人合一 This term is a central concept in ancient Chinese philosophy concerning the relationship between nature and human beings, referring to the close and inseparable relationship between them, and emphasising the interconnectedness and unity of natural and man-made aspects of Tao 道. The idea originated in the *Zhouyi* 周易, and was first explicitly put forward by Zhang Zai 张载 of the Northern Song Dynasty 北宋 in *Zhengmeng - Qian Cheng* 正蒙·乾称篇.

heterotopia” (*Jing You Xin Sheng*)¹⁰³. The temporal dimension presents a more complex layer: the truth of the case is gradually pieced together through traumatic flashbacks, a nonlinear narrative that sustains suspense while resonating with a configurative philosophy of time—what could be reframed as “the reverent memorial in traumatic recall” (*Shen Zhong Zhui Yuan*)¹⁰⁴ within the narrative’s moral architecture. In the ethical dimension, the film’s treatment of **redemption** fundamentally reconfigures Western Noir expectations—when Xin Xiaofeng ultimately chooses self-sacrifice, this seemingly typical Noir ending is inscribed with the language of a narratively configured moral system, where concepts akin to *Ren* (benevolence), *Yi* (righteousness), and *Cheng* (integrity) are dynamically constructed and enacted.

The discussion unfolds along three interconnected theoretical paths: first, I analyze how the heterotopic character of urban space reconfigures the geopolitics of Film Noir; next, I unravel the philosophy of time embodied in traumatic memory and nonlinear narration; finally, I reveal how a narrative-driven moral configuration creatively transforms the genre’s conventional ethical closures. This analysis aims to unlock the film’s distinct aesthetic codes and offer a case study in the cultural adaptation of contemporary Chinese genre cinema. When Film Noir theory encounters a locally configured moral discourse, the collision and fusion of the two—much like the fractured mirror in the film reflecting multiple truths—reveals the creative potential of cultural hybridization, as well as the identity anxieties and aesthetic breakthroughs of contemporary Chinese filmmakers.

6.4.1 Spatial Drifting: The Heterotopic Cityscape

The urban space in the “Dead End” constructs a complex heterotopia that simultaneously embodies and subverts noir conventions. Foucault defines heterotopia as “a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which all the other real sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (Foucault 1986, 22-27). This concept perfectly encapsulates the film’s depiction of Xiamen’s urban landscape, particularly in the rooftop chase sequence, which reworks classic noir spatial politics through three distinct strategies: Edward Dimendberg’s “vertical axis of dread” (Dimendberg 2004) is transformed in this film into a composite of handheld shots. When Xin and Yi are chasing the criminals on the narrow beams of a skyscraper, the filmmaker compresses them into the same frame with shot from a low angle, while the glass walls of Xiamen’s landmark buildings in the background constitute a oppressive geometric body (Figure 6.4.1). At the moment they nearly collide with

¹⁰³ 境由心生 The concept of “Mind-Constructed Environment”境由心生 has been used by David Birdwell to analyse the spatial awareness in Hou Hsiao-hsien’s 侯孝贤 films, and in the context of this paper, it should be translated as “Mind-Constructed Heterotopia” 境由心生的异托邦. The translation employs a composite method that maintains philosophical rigour while conforming to the discourse of film space theory.

¹⁰⁴ 慎终追远 This concept was translated as “Reverent Memorialism” 慎终追远 by Roger T. Ames (1998, 63) in *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*. In the context of this chapter, it would be more appropriate to translate it as “the Reverent Memorialism in Traumatic Recall” 创伤回忆中的慎终追远 to maintain the integrity of the Confucian concept and to link it with psychoanalytic film theory. In this way, it can avoid the over-naturalisation of “culture-specific terms”, meanwhile ensuring the precise flow of academic discourse.

the criminals, a vertical overhead shot dramatically heightens the confrontation over the constricted escape path. Confined within an intensely cramped space, each step above the treacherous abyss below is fraught with danger; a single misstep means certain doom (Figure 6.4.2). This compositional strategy creates a dizzying sensation in the audience as if they are on the edge of an abyss. The handheld camera mimics Yi's subjective viewpoint, creating a sharp, breathy jitter during the chase, which, along with the wind whistling, reinforces the weightlessness associated with vertical space.



Figure 6.4.1

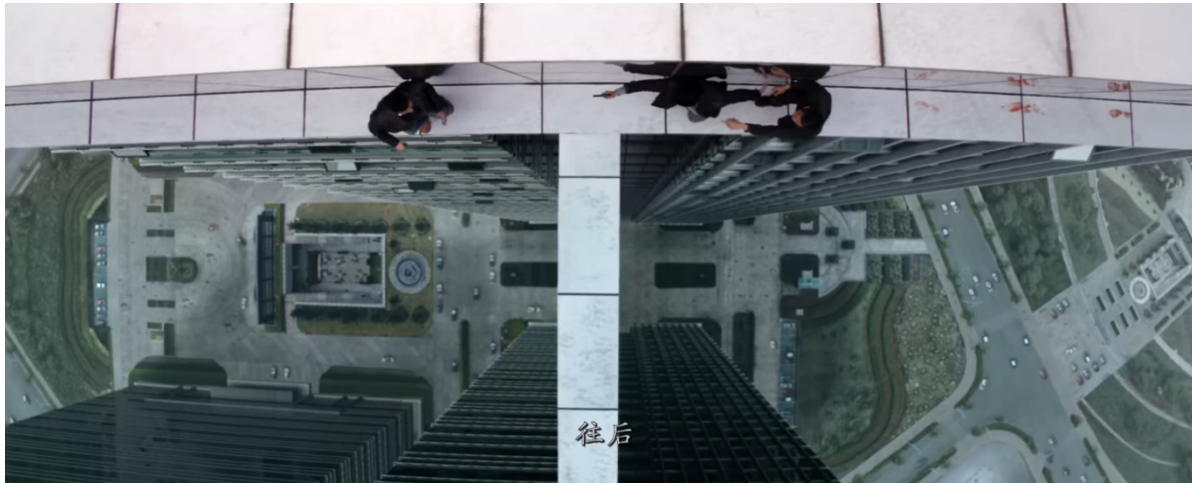


Figure 6.4.2

Accompanied by a fast-paced, drum-like staccato, Xin and Yi traverse blood-red rooftops and climb a narrow, fragile fire escape. The scattered bloodstains and hurried footsteps weave this arena into a triple allegory for the state apparatus, urban life, and the scars of its inhabitants. As a "Heterotopia" in Foucault's sense, the space of the rooftop carries multiple symbolic systems in this film: when the chase enters into a furious stage, the radio murmur inside the police station continues to intervene in the background, upgrading the pursuit into the symbolic presence of the state apparatus, and transforming the individual confrontation into institutional oppression. The rooftops paved with blood-red foam plastic allude to the everyday life of the

underclass and symbolize moral dilemmas. The narrow emergency escape ladder that appears in the scene not only directs the characters' movement but also obstructs their action sequences, metaphorizing the fragile fabric of urbanizing progress. The scattered bloodstains that smear Xin as he climbs the ladder resonate with the murder case from seven years prior.

The film is a visual representation of the Confucian spatial concept and moral choices. The rooftop space is a typical "Xiamen" space, unlike the closed and deep alleyways in Film Noir. The "Moral Gazing Space" put forward by Lin Niantong is demonstrated here: when Xin is forced to the edge of the rooftop, the long take focuses on his face in close-up, with backlighting outlining the shadowed contours of his cheekbones. At this point, *Mencius's* idea of "moral mind-preservation" is visualized - through the pupils fluttering and his mouth twitching (Figure 6.4.3), the actor expresses the violent conflict between his ego (survival instinct) and his superego (moral judgment). Notably, During the chase, Xin's trembling pupils and twitching mouth mirror his facial expression from the execution: lips twitching yet faintly smiling, eyes wide open—a visage of fear intertwined with a compelled release. This spatial symbolic repetition incorporates individual redemption and collective punishment into the Confucian Ethical framework - when Xin clings to Yi's arm and refuses to let go, the bleak sunlight that is captured through Xin's point of view after they are rescued resembles a modern deconstruction of the Confucian saying "Self-Restoration through Ritual Propriety" (*Ke Ji Fu Li*)¹⁰⁵.

Through the visual reconstruction of vertical anxiety, the symbolic encoding of threshold space, and the image translation of Confucian ethics, this chase scene completes a profound analysis of social anxiety in contemporary China. The filmmaker deconstructs the traditional paradigm of Film Noir into a triple spatial competition of "state-family-individual", so that Xin's eventual execution is not just the fate of the criminal, it's also a visual allegory of the moral dilemmas in the transitional society. This creative practice of integrating personality theory with Confucian ethics provides a new narrative paradigm for Chinese crime films.



Figure 6.4.3

¹⁰⁵ 克己复礼 is a Confucian maxim from *Analects* (12:1), framing moral cultivation (*xiūshēn* 修身) as subduing ego (*yù* 欲) to revive ritual norms (*lǐ* 礼). It links individual virtue (*dé* 德) to societal harmony (*hé* 和), urging rulers/scholars to model *lǐ* as a living practice (*shēnxíng* 身行), not mere ritualism.

6.4.2 Temporal Drifting: Traumatic Narratives

When Yi witnesses Xin's distorted reflection of his drowning in the rear-view mirror of the police car in the torrential rain overlapping with the drowned girl's pupil seven years ago, the visual fissure repeatedly cut by the windshield wipers not only rips apart the linear lie of time but also stitches together the traumatic memory snowball, the cognitive labyrinth of the mirrors, and the Confucius's contemplation—"What passes is like this" *Shi Zhe Ru Si* - an ethical redemption using water as a mirror is quietly reconstructed in the overlapping of time.

The film practices the Snowballing Effect of Traumatic Memory and Narrative Ethics through non-linear narratives. In the "Reservoir Murder" flashback sequence, the film reconstructs Xin's, Yang's and Chen's traumatic memories through four times fragmented narratives. The first flashback is from Xin's point of view: he is barefoot on the mossy embankment, his right hand knuckles are white from over-exerting himself on the iron gate, and the close-ups of rust falling from the gate create an "Auditory Montage"(Bordwell & Thompson 2013, 143) with the girl's cries for help in the voice-over. The second flashback switches to Yang's point of view, where the fishing rod in his hand suddenly breaks and the line cuts through the picture like a silver blade in the backlight, suggesting his moral boundaries have collapsed. The third focuses on the reflection of Chen's binoculars, the camera shaking violently in the rainstorm, the light spots moving across their faces, echoing the the "*Snowballing of Traumatic Memory*" put forward by Ulric Neisser - every time one remembers something, one adds new fragments of perception, just like a snowball rolling. that each recollection adds new perceptual fragments, as the snowball rolls with more impurities (Neisser 1996, 322). The fourth flashback contrasts subjective and objective shots: Xin's pupils reflect the drowning girl's struggle, and then the scene cuts abruptly to a close-up of Yi Guchun leafing through the files in the archive room ten years later, the pages flipping and the bubbling of drowning forming a sense of empathy. This non-linear narrative is not only aligned with the "Fragmented Encoding - Reconstructive Retrieval" of traumatic memories (van der Kolk & Fisler 1995, 173), but also reveals the unreliability of memories through the "Snowball Effect". --Xin adds the detail of "leaving the girl's swimming costume unzipped" to each recollection, a fictional action that reinforces self-punishment and manipulates the our perceptions. Neisser's Reality Surveillance Theory suggests that traumatic memories are spatially and temporally dislocated at the encoding stage (Neisser 1996, 325), and the film transforms this cognitive rift into a visual poetics through the colours gradation (from greenish-grey to blood-red) and the sound effects superimposition (heartbeat intensification) of the four flashbacks.

When Yi pieces together the pieces of Xin's fragmented conversations into a cognitive mirror image of the "conspiracy to murder" between the recording evidence in the rented house and the remnants in the archive, the film is transforming the "truth misrecognition" into an ethical redemptive fissure with a dynamic and ambiguous visual rhetoric. --That cognitive gap between judicial rationality and human compassion is precisely the visual ethical arena where violent stares and ethical tolerance coexist.

The scene in which Yi discovers the recording of Xin's conversation with the three of them in a rented house is the ultimate presentation of the unreliability of perception. When Xin says, "That child should not be kept" in the recording, the camera suddenly cuts to a slow-motion replay from the reservoir ten years earlier: the moment when the drowned girl's fingers slip from Xin's palm is precisely synchronized with the end of the word "keep" in the recording, forming what Deleuze calls a "Time Crystal" (Deleuze 1989, 89) structure.

Subsequently, Yi Guchun's cognitive construction is completed through three sets of overlapping footage: The reality evidence layer is the yellowed case file in the archive room. The auditory imagery layer is the recorded conversation in which Yang says, "We have to make sure that Weiba never knows the truth". The visual projection layer is the montage of the "Murder" that flashes in Yi's eyes. This multimodal narrative alludes to Lacan's "Mirror Stage" theory, in which Yi "Misidentifies" the truth through the recordings, and the essence of his perception is the confirmation of his identity as a police officer (Lacan 1977, 2). These employs the superimposition and defocusing techniques here: as Yi reorganizes the case in his mind, the digital grain defocusing occurs at the image, overlapping images from multiple periods, and the silhouettes of the characters fluttering slightly in response to their respiratory rate, a visual manipulation that is consistent with the perceptions of PTSD sufferers (van der Kolk & Fisler 1995, 176), which also echoes Foucault's "Heterotopia" (Foucault 1986, 22).

Yi's cognitive rift is essentially the alienation of the "Body-Subject" in the symbolic system (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 134). When he misinterprets "Weiba" in the recording as an associate of the murder, his perceptual field has been permeated by the symbolic order of his identity as a police officer (e.g. the professional ethic of "upholding justice"), resulting in the "misrecognition" as a way of preserving the integrity of the subject (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 134). This process is intertextual with Yi's "Misrecognition of Reality" at the end.

6.4.3 Moral Configuration and the Reconstruction of Temporality: Ethical Cycles and the Re-Making of Fate

The narrative-driven moral temporality presented in the film is characterized not by linear causality or karmic determinism, but by a moral topology pivoted on configured virtues such as humaneness (*Ren*). When the mechanical notion of "cosmic retribution" (*Tian Li Xun Huan*) collides with the configured ethical tremor of "compassionate awakening"¹⁰⁶ (*Ce Yin Zhi Fa*), an ethical reconfiguration—embodied in the principle that "the son does not inherit the father's debt"¹⁰⁷ (*Fu Zhai Zi Bu Chang*)—fissures through the temporal folds of the narrative. This

¹⁰⁶ Chinese written as 恻隐之发, it is a Mencian concept from *Mencius*(2A:6), framing moral intuition (xìng shàn 性善) as an innate, emotion-driven impulse (qíng 情) to alleviate suffering (kǔ 苦). It defines humanity (rén 仁) as this visceral "shudder of pity" (shùnrén zhī xīn 恕人之心), arising unbidden when witnessing others' distress, prior to rational calculation.

¹⁰⁷ Chinese written as 父债子不偿, this is a Confucian-legal principle rooted in classical Chinese jurisprudence, particularly *Tang Code* (653 CE) and later dynastic laws, which rejected ancestral liability (zǔzé 祖责) as unjust. It upheld individual moral responsibility (zìzé 自责) over familial guilt-by-association, prioritizing rén (humaneness) in legal ethics.

configured rupture not only shatters bloodline-based determinism through the dialectics of “taking life to preserve life”¹⁰⁸ (*Sha Sheng Hu Sheng*), but also stirs the undercurrents of “three-generational karma”¹⁰⁹ (*San Shi Yin Guo*) into an open-ended existence of “creating without possessing”¹¹⁰ (*Sheng Er Bu You*). Thus, fatalism transmutes from ironclad causality into configured moral praxis, echoing the idea of “humaneness as self-determined becoming” (*Wei Ren You Ji*)¹¹¹.

The film constructs a narrative ouroboros through aquatic imagery, achieving ethical-narrative closure between the bookending rainstorms. The opening scene of Xin walking barefoot through rainwater—with slow-motion ripples visually recalling the classical sentiment that “the past is like flowing water” (*Analects* 12.1) contrasts with the finale in which the surviving Chen Bijue leaps from a cliff after Xin and Yang’s wrongful execution. This forms a hydraulically configured moral allegory, resonant with the saying “The virtuous delight in water” (*Ren Zhe Yue Shui*)¹¹² (*Analects* 6.23). What emerges is a form of narrative moral circularity: Xin’s crime (a violation of *ren*) achieves redemption through configured self-sacrifice, while Inspector Yi Guchun’s legalism (*Fa*) transcends itself through an act of configured clemency (*Yi*).

This narrative strategy reconfigures film noir’s conventional fatalism: whereas classic noir protagonists succumb to inexorable destiny, Xin’s death embodies a configured ethic of “self-restraint to restore propriety” (*Analects* 12.1), and Yi’s epiphany extends the configured principle of “applying the measuring-square to others”¹¹³ (*Tui Ji Ji Ren*) (*Doctrine of the Mean* 13.3). Yi’s adoption of Xin’s orphaned “daughter” Weiba visually actualizes Mengzi’s (孟

¹⁰⁸ Chinese written as 杀生-护生, it is a *Buddhist-Daoist* ethical dichotomy rooted in ahimsa (non-harm) and *tiāndào* (natural harmony). It opposes violence (*bào lì* 暴力) to all sentient beings (*yǒuqíng* 有情) against compassionate stewardship (*bǎohù* 保育), as codified in *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* (杀生戒) and Zhuangzi’s “all-life reverence” (*qíshēng zhī mìng* 齐生之命).

¹⁰⁹ 三世因果 is a Buddhist doctrine from the *Abhidharma* texts (e.g. *Abhidharma-kośa*), asserting actions (*karma*) ripen across past-present-future lives (*sānshì* 三世). It links ethical choices (*shīla* 戒) to rebirth (*saṃsāra* 轮回), teaching that intentional deeds (*cetanā* 意业) determine one’s future conditions (*vipāka* 果报), even across lifetimes.

¹¹⁰ Chinese written as 生而不有, this conception is a Daoist principle from *Dao De Jing* (Ch. 2/10), advocating selfless generosity as the essence of cosmic harmony (*tiāndào* 天道). It rejects possessive control (*wéi* 为) by urging rulers/parents to nurture life (*shēng* 生) without claiming ownership, paralleling the sun’s role in sustaining all yet claiming nothing.

¹¹¹ Chinese written as 为仁由己 it is a Confucian maxim from *Analects* (12:1), emphasizing self-directed ethical cultivation (*xiūshēn* 修身) over external coercion. It asserts that virtue (*dé* 德) and humanity (*rén* 仁) are not imposed but chosen, rejecting fatalism (*mìng* 命) by affirming human autonomy in moral growth.

¹¹² Chinese written as 仁者乐水, is a Confucian metaphor from *Analects* (6:23), pairing moral virtue (*rén*) with fluid adaptability (水之智). Contrasted with “the wise (*zhìzhě*) delight in mountains” (*zhìzhě lè shān*), it frames *rén* as dynamic, empathetic, and responsive to change (*shùn tiān yīng rén* 顺天应人), akin to water’s yielding resilience.

¹¹³ Chinese written as 推己及人 It is a Confucian principle from *Analects* (15:24), encapsulating the Golden Rule of reciprocity (*shù* 恕) via “Do not impose on others what you do not wish for yourself” (*己所不欲, 勿施于人*). It underscores *rén* (humaneness) as empathetic projection (*gòngqíng* 共情) and role-based ethics (*fēnwèn* 分文), e.g., rulers must treat subjects as they wish to be treated.

子)ethical proposition: "When poor, tend to your virtue; when eminent, tend to the world"¹¹⁴ (*Qiong Ze Du Shan Qi Shen Da Ze Jian Ji tian Xia*)(*Mencius* 7A9). Xin's execution as a convict places Yi in a configured ethical aporia of "poverty" (professional constraints) and "eminence" (moral agency)—as a law enforcer he upholds the limits of procedural justice ("tending virtue"), yet ultimately ruptures occupational confines to reconstruct ethical order through "tending the world." Yi's professional "poverty" as pursuer constitutes the foundation of his configured "self-tending." His restrained compassion—never overstepping legal bounds—accumulates configured ethical potential energy for "world-tending." This reflects the configured insight that "guarding one's character is paramount" (*Shou Shen Wei Da*)¹¹⁵ (*Mencius* 4A19) wherein Yi's restraint forms the bedrock of his configured "eminence" moral persona.

After Xin's death, Yi's adoption of Weiba completes the configured paradigm shift from "self-tending" to "world-tending." This transgression of strict judicial ethics transforms the configured notion of "cherishing kin to humanize others" (*Qin Qin Er Ren Min*) into a cosmopolitan praxis—not only assuming parental responsibility but dismantling the deterministic logic of "sins-of-the-father" (*Fu Zhai Zi Chang*), thereby reconstituting Weiba from a "bloodline stigma" into a "vessel of configured humaneness" (*Ren Xin*). Yi's adoption creatively interprets the configured principle that "the humane love others" (*Ren Zhe Ai Ren*). By refusing to exile Weiba for Xin's crimes, his "world-tending" enacts the configured ideal to "honor others' elders as yours, cherish others' children as yours" (*Lao Wu Lao Yi Ji Ren Zhi Lao, You Wu You Yi Ji Ren Zhi You*), elevating judicial "poverty" to configured ethical "eminence." This choice engages with configured dilemmas of "principled flexibility" (*Jing Quan Zhi Bian*) while proposing a contemporary paradigm of "transcending legal rigidity through configured humaneness".

6.5 Theoretical Synthesis - Interdisciplinary Dialogues in Cinematic Language

This chapter synthesizes the three theoretical frameworks applied in the preceding analyses—Lin Niantong's Mirroring-Drifting theory, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and narrative-driven moral configuration—through a systematic re-examination of "Dead End's" key sequences. By adopting what David Bordwell terms "piecemeal theorizing" (Bordwell 2008, 147), we demonstrate how these approaches collectively illuminate the film's narrative complexity beyond the explanatory capacity of any single paradigm. The integration of these frameworks highlights the dynamic interplay between cinematic form, psychological subjectivity, and

¹¹⁴ Chinese written as 穷则独善其身，达则兼济天下 It reflects a moral fallback principle in Confucian-influenced thought, first articulated by *Mencius* (*Mengzi* 7B:35). It urges individuals to perfect their character (shàn 善) even when unable to reform society (济世, jì shì). While Confucianism prioritizes societal engagement ("修身齐家治国平天下" / *Great Learning*), dú shàn qí shēn provides an ethical retreat: in chaotic times, one must remain uncompromised ("穷则独善其身" / "In poverty, cultivate virtue alone") while awaiting a just ruler ("达则兼济天下" / "In power, improve the world"). This principle underscores moral integrity over expedience.

¹¹⁵ Chinese written as 守身为大, it is a Confucian maxim from *Mencius*(7A:36), emphasizing that moral self-cultivation (xiūshēn 修身) precedes civic duty. It warns against compromising virtue (dé 德) for external gain (e.g., power, wealth), urging individuals to "guard their person (shǒu shēn 守身)" as the foundation of ethical leadership.

ethically charged storytelling, ultimately revealing how meaning is constructed through the film's unique aesthetic and narrative architecture.

6.5.1 Case Study 1: The Interrogation Scene as Heterotopic Nexus

Mirroring-Drifting theory, as a culturally-situated research paradigm, emphasizes the interpretation of cultural phenomena through the dynamic relationship between space, power, and subjectivity. Lin Niantong's concept of the "cultural mirror" within this framework offers a powerful tool for analyzing subjective cognition and the operation of power in specific social-cinematic scenes. In the interrogation space, this "cultural mirror" not only maps the power dynamics between subjects but also reflects deeper, culturally-configured psychological structures.

The spatial layout of the interrogation room, as a site of power and discipline, embodies a dialectic of visibility and invisibility. Separated by an iron fence, Yi and Xin exist in a condition of physical visibility—each perceiving the other's presence—while the barrier simultaneously produces psychological invisibility, obstructing full access to each other's inner worlds. This superimposition of seen and unseen unfolds across three dimensions.

First, the scene projects power through visual dominance. The set design reinforces the law-enforcer's visual advantage: Yi stands, observing Xin panoramically, while Xin remains seated, fixed in the position of the observed. This differential visibility mirrors Foucault's mechanism of "Panopticism," transforming the interrogation into a micro-theater of regulatory power. Second, characters engage in discursive invisibility through psychological gameplay. Silence, half-truths, and strategic speech—Xin's sacrifice to protect his adopted daughter, Yi's legally-framed questioning—mask real intentions, exemplifying what Lacan terms "signifier slippage," where language becomes a tool in intersubjective power struggle. Third, the scene triggers mnemonic reconfiguration. Xin's selective forgetting and Yi's fragmentary reconstruction of evidence create a spectrum of memory visibility/invisibility, echoing Derrida's logic of "différance" in the subjective construction of narrative pasts.

As an arena of power, the interrogation scene focuses tension between lawful authority and configured notions of good and evil. Police badges, uniforms, and handcuffs constitute a visual hegemony. Yi exerts moral pressure through a care-styled interrogation, while Xin accepts disproportionate responsibility—a dynamic that reveals law's disciplinary function as a form of cultural capital, even as it softens those aspects most radically opposed to human sentiment. Throughout, Yi insists on procedural justice, whereas Xin strives to preserve dignity. This is not a struggle between absolute good and evil, but between configured ethics of responsibility and conviction. Xin's concealment of evidence reflects a humanistic concern for his daughter, yet violates legal process. As the interrogation proceeds, power shifts dynamically: Yi gains ground through evidence, while Xin sustains subjectivity through psychological defense. Power thus operates not as one-way repression, but as continuous reproduction through intersubjective negotiation and resistance.

The iron fence is not merely a physical barrier but a visual representation of a social-moral order. It separates enforcer from suspect, echoing the configured logic that social distinctions maintain order while underlying unity persists—a dynamic reminiscent of the classical idea that “ritual distinguishes, music harmonizes” 礼别异, 乐合同.¹¹⁶ As a ritualized practice, the interrogation ceremony sustains hierarchy through spatial segregation. The metal’s rigidity and geometric form symbolize the normativity of legal prescription. The fence also maps a configured tension in relational ethics—akin to the classical formulation that “between father and son, there is affection; between ruler and subject, righteousness” 父子有亲, 君臣有义¹¹⁷ (*Mencius* 3A:4). Though physically proximate, the two occupy emotionally distant roles, embodying the inherent strain between moral obligation and human warmth. The fence’s carceral imagery further visualizes a configured practice of self-restraint: Xin’s psychological self-confinement to protect his daughter finds material expression in the bars, representing both a moral choice and an effect of cultural discipline.

The film articulates a tripartite moral structure—humaneness (*Ren*), ritual propriety (*Li*), and righteousness (*Yi*)—translated into modern behavior and forming a distinctive ethical landscape. Xin’s lies to protect his daughter embody a modern dilemma of configured humaneness. This choice carries multiple implications: First, it transforms the traditional principle of “affection among kin” (*Qin Qin*), extending kinship ethics to non-familial bonds—an inverse application of “treat others’ aged as your own.” Second, it intensifies the tension between humaneness (*Ren*) and righteousness (*Yi*). Xin’s deception violates legal impartiality, recalling the classical interplay between “humaneness within, righteousness without” (*Ren Nei Yi Wai*)¹¹⁸ highlighting the adaptive challenges of configured morality in a rule-of-law society. Finally, it reveals the risks of emotional calculus in ethical reasoning. Xin’s cost-benefit weighing aligns with utilitarian logic, yet his ultimate choice remains driven by a configured “heart of compassion” (*Bu Ren Ren Zhi Xin*)¹¹⁹, presenting a unique form of sentimentalist ethics that underscores the complexity of moral judgment in post-traditional contexts.

The film manifests the modern transmutation of ritual propriety (*Li*) into cultural discipline through proceduralized interrogation rituals. The panoptic bars and standardized uniforms

¹¹⁶ It originates from *Xunzi* (荀子), a Confucian classic by Xun Kuang (c. 310–235 BCE). It underscores Confucian social philosophy: rites (礼/li) establish hierarchical order and clarify roles to prevent chaos, while music (乐/yue) cultivates emotional resonance and shared values, bridging social divides through communal harmony. Together, they balance structure and cohesion in society.

¹¹⁷ It is drawn from *Mencius* (孟子, Book 4A:4), a core Confucian text. It encapsulates the ethical bedrock of Confucian social order: filial affection (亲/qīn) anchors familial bonds, while righteous obligation (义/yì) defines moral conduct between ruler and minister, ensuring societal harmony through vertically tiered yet morally interdependent relationships.

¹¹⁸ 仁内义外 It originates from debates in early Confucian texts, notably *Mencius* (6A:10, where he critiques it) and *Xunzi* (which partially endorses it). This dichotomy posits moral agency as two-tiered: rén (inner humanity, e.g., natural empathy) arises from innate virtue, while yì (external duty, e.g. societal norms) is shaped by ritual and context, reflecting competing views on whether ethics stem from nature (*Mencius*) or nurture (*Xunzi*).

¹¹⁹ 不忍人之心 It is a cornerstone of Mencian ethics, appearing in *Mencius* (孟子, 2A:6). It posits that all humans inherently possess four moral sprouts (sì duān 四端)—compassion, shame, courtesy, and judgment—rooted in this innate “heart of 不忍” (bù rěn). Mencius argues this “heart of 不忍” is humanity’s essential spark, distinguishing humans from beasts and the foundation for cultivating ren (仁, humaneness) through conscious ethical extension.

construct a hierarchical power-space that mirrors *Li*'s spatial ordering. The segregation between Xin (behind bars) and Yi (before bars) materializes a configured "differentiation between superior and inferior"¹²⁰ (*Mencius* 3A4), now transposed into legalistic power discipline. Yi's uniform, posture, and metronomic questioning constitute disciplinary signifiers aligning with the *Xunzi*'s notion that "Ritual regulates appearances"¹²¹ (*Xunzi* 19). Conversely, Xin's prison garb and bowed head epitomize Foucault's "docile bodies," visually quoting the configured idea that "Those below should manifest reverence"¹²² (*Analects* 1.13) while exposing its carceral reformulation. This spatial theater operationalizes *Li*'s core paradox: the same architectural grammar that once reinforced hierarchical deference now enforces modern penal rationality, where judicial authority stems not from moral cultivation but from institutional performativity.

Though the interrogation lacks full ritualization, it adheres to fundamental investigatory protocols. Yi's standardized "query-response" format subtly resonates with the procedural nature of configured *Li*. When confronted about impersonation, Xin's trembling voice and bloodshot eyes reenact a configured ideal of "restraining oneself to return to propriety"¹²³ (*Analects* 12.1)—his confession serving as moral atonement. Meanwhile, Yi's silent note-taking embodies configured "vigilance in solitude," disciplining the enforcer through contemplative restraint. This interplay transforms the interrogation into a dialectical space: Xin's visceral breakdown deconstructs *Li*'s formalism through raw penitence, while Yi's disciplined silence reconstructs authority through internalized ethical vigilance.

As a law enforcer, Yi embodies the configured paradox of "humaneness-ritual unity"¹²⁴ through his complex bond with Xin. The visceral detail of him lighting a cigarette,

¹²⁰ 尊卑有別 it encapsulates a core tenet of Confucian social order, rooted in *Analects* (论语, e.g. 12:11) and amplified in later texts like *Xunzi*. It asserts that social roles (尊/zūn "high," 卑/bēi "low") are not arbitrary but mirror cosmic order, with each tier (e.g. ruler/subject, parent/child) bound by mutual duties (li 礼). While zūn bēi legitimizes hierarchy, Confucianism emphasizes that moral worth transcends rank—a ruler's authority depends on virtuous leadership, not mere status.

¹²¹ 礼以制表 this reflects a core Confucian tenet articulated across classical texts (e.g. *Xunzi* 荀子, *Li Ji* 礼记), emphasizing that ritual (li 礼) governs external conduct to manifest inner virtue (de 德). While li governs social protocols (e.g. gestures, dress, ceremonies), its true purpose is to embody and transmit moral intent, ensuring sincerity (cheng 诚) through structured behavior. Without ritual, virtues risk becoming abstract; with ritual, even mundane acts (e.g. bowing, offerings) become vessels of shared humanity.

¹²² 在下者敬 This term reflects a foundational Confucian duty, rooted in texts like *Analects* (论语, e.g. 12:2) and *Li Ji* (礼记). It underscores that subordinates (在下者, e.g. ministers, children, commoners) must embody jing (deferential respect) toward superiors (rulers, parents, elders) to sustain societal harmony. However, Confucianism qualifies this: jing is not blind obedience but morally grounded reverence, contingent on superiors' virtuous leadership (shang you dao 上有道). If superiors act unjustly, jing may yield to righteous critique (yi 义).

¹²³ 克己复礼 It is a cornerstone of Confucian self-cultivation, drawn from *Analects* (论语, 12:1). It urges individuals to subdue base desires (克己, kè jǐ) through disciplined adherence to ritual (li 礼), thereby realigning their actions with cosmic/social harmony. While li initially governs outward forms (e.g. gestures, hierarchy), its ultimate aim is to internalize virtue (rén 仁) until ritual becomes spontaneous. Mencius later extends this: true li arises not from force but from sincerity (cheng 诚), making ritual a bridge between self-restraint and moral authenticity.

¹²⁴ 仁礼合一 This concept reflects the Confucian synthesis of inner virtue and outer form, articulated in *Analects* (e.g. 1:2, 12:1) and *Xunzi*. It asserts that rén (ethical core) and lǐ (ritual practice) are interdependent: li externalizes rén (e.g. filial piety via mourning rites), while réninfuses lǐ with sincerity

taking a drag, and passing it to Xin's lips exposes both resistance to truth and moral anguish—transforming the interrogation from legal procedure into a modern crucible of configured “sentiment propriety-law” (*Qing 情-Li 礼-Fa 法*) trilemma. Xin's climactic confession “I've been waiting for this day” ultimately transubstantiates the configured ethic that “consciousness of shame is near to courage”¹²⁵ (*Doctrine of the Mean* 20) into voluntary submission to legal discipline—a performative acceptance that achieves narrative reconciliation between individual agency and institutional order.

In “Dead End”, the prison dialogue centering on “evidence concealment” deconstructs configured righteousness (*Yi*) into an ultimate moral abyss. Their confrontation dramatizes the collision between legal justice and humanistic *Yi*. Legally, concealing evidence constitutes obstruction of justice, yet it paradoxically aligns with *Yi*'s private ethics—to protect the child's innocence, they shoulder collective guilt, transforming *Yi* into absolute shelter for the vulnerable. This choice inverts the traditional *Yi-Li* (righteousness-benefit) hierarchy, prioritizing micro-righteousness (guarding specific lives) over macro-righteousness (upholding social order), rendering *Yi* an ambivalent signifier in moral dilemmas. As an enforcer, *Yi*'s duty demands truth-seeking, yet his mentorship with Xin and empathy for Weiba trap him in a rupture between public and private righteousness. During interrogation, his veiled warnings and avoidance of probing the “fourth perpetrator” become complicit endorsement—he recognizes Xin's act as *Yi*'s continuation but remains institutionally barred from approval, embodying the “lone warrior” stranded between law and compassion. Xin's false confession to capital charges elevates concealment into *Yi*'s apotheosis, pushing the configured principle of “sacrificing life for righteousness” to its modern limit: this *Yi* transcends traditional frameworks, becoming pure ethical martyrdom. Their final exchanged smile solemnizes *Yi*'s tragic paradox: when law fails moral complexity, individuals can only articulate *Yi* through self-annihilation.

Lacan's theory of the Mirror Stage reveals the cognitive process by which the subject confirms self-identity through the gaze of the Other. In the interrogation scene, this theoretical framework provides a perspective for analyzing inter-subjective relations. This room, as a materialized space of symbolic order, becomes an ideal arena for observing how mirror stage theory operates.

Xin's misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) of his police identity constitutes the central contradiction in his subject construction. Though interrogated as a criminal suspect, he internally positions himself as a secret protector of his adopted daughter. This role mismatch reflects the Lacanian conflict between the Imaginary and the Symbolic, in which the subject splits into mirror identities. Moreover, language in the scene operates deceptively. Xin's silence

(chéng 诚). Without rén, lǐ becomes empty formality; without lǐ, rén risks chaos. Mencius calls this “the great harmony” (大和).

¹²⁵ 知耻近乎勇 This is a Confucian maxim drawn from *The Middle Doctrine* (*Zhongyong* 中庸, Ch. 20), emphasizing that moral self-awareness (耻, chǐ) drives ethical resolve (勇, yǒng). Shame here is not guilt but discomfort with moral failure (e.g., neglecting duty, betraying virtue). By confronting chǐ, one cultivates yǒng to correct wrongs—a “courage of conscience” distinct from physical bravery.

and defensive speech act as what Žižek terms “cynical ideology,” masking real motives through discursive self-deception. Typically, the suspect occupies the gazed-upon position, yet Xin transforms Yi’s gaze into a mirror for self-confirmation—an inversion corresponding to Lacan’s “gaze of the gaze,” revealing the subject’s mobility within power relations.

Yi’s gaze functions both as legal authority and as the Other that deconstructs Xin’s subjective fantasy. As embodiment of the law, Yi constitutes Lacan’s “Big Other.” His questioning and evidence-presentation adhere to the symbolic order, forcing Xin to expose subjective contradictions. This gaze enacts what Žižek calls “symbolic castration,” dissolving subject integrity through linguistic discipline. Yi’s sharp gaze produces visual violence, eliciting Xin’s anxiety and defensiveness—a dynamic illustrating Foucault’s “disciplinary power” operating through micro-physical techniques like the gaze. When Xin realizes his disguise is detected, his subjective construction is radically disturbed, confronting what Lacan terms the Real—the traumatic beyond-symbolization encountered in the symbolic order’s cracks.

Theoretical synergy is vital here. Mirroring-Drifting theory, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and narrative-driven moral configuration do not operate in isolation but echo and complement one another, constructing a multi-layered interpretive system. Mirroring-Drifting theory, with its astropolitical lens, treats filmic scenes as spatial carriers of power operation and subject construction, offering tools to understand behavior within specific spaces. Lacanian psychoanalysis delves into characters’ subconscious desires, anxieties, and identity crises, revealing deep psychological motives. Narrative-driven moral configuration provides cultural specificity, situating behavior within a locally-configured moral framework, deepening and localizing the analysis. These three intertwine into an integral whole, enabling comprehensive interpretation.

Lacanian psychoanalysis operates at the interpretive foundation, penetrating characters’ innermost psyches to reveal subject-formation in key scenes like the interrogation. Xin’s anxiety, fear, and identity crisis when confronting authority are not mere stress but outward manifestations of subconscious conflict between desire and reality. Lacan supplies a psychodynamic basis for understanding motive, showing how his choices arise from complex inner processes.

Mirroring-Drifting theory functions as a mediating layer, investigating individual psyche within networks of power through spatial analysis. The interrogation scene is a heterotopian nexus where power operates subtly. This theory reveals how space shapes behavior and psychology, and how characters negotiate power within it, linking micro-level psychology to macro-level social power relations. It clarifies how spatial elements—layout, lighting—affect psychological states, and how those states are influenced by socio-culturally configured power concepts.

As a cultural decoder, narrative-driven moral configuration occupies the surface of the interpretive system, providing a localized framework for characters’ choices. In this configured moral landscape, values analogous to humaneness, loyalty, righteousness, and familial duty

deeply influence behavior and judgment. Though Xin's actions violate law, they carry complex moral considerations within this configured framework, enabling cross-cultural dialogue and adapting Western theories to the Chinese context.

In the film, Xin and his friends commit a felony due to a momentary lapse, yet demonstrate extraordinary moral self-consciousness during atonement. Interpreting this requires synergistic engagement of psychoanalysis, cultural studies, and configured ethics. Psychoanalysis reveals subconscious guilt and self-punishment: Xin's assault echoes an Oedipal "patricide-matrimony" projection, with sexual repression intertextualizing criminal behavior. Culturally, the analysis examines social discipline's impact: the trio choose lower-class occupations (assistant police, taxi driver, fisherman) to enact identity-stigma self-exile through spatial practice. The configured ethical framework focuses on the "crime-punishment" dialectic, where a configured sense of "excess is as bad as deficiency" (*Guo You Bu Ji*) collides with Kantian deontology when legal punishment and moral redemption mismatch. This multidisciplinary dialogue breaks single-perspective limits, constructing a three-dimensional explanatory network.

When introducing Lacanian mirror theory, I engage in theoretical grafting and contextual adaptation to accommodate the film's indigenous narrative logic. Applying Foucault's "discipline and punishment" to analyze the trio's subjugation to Yi's surveillance finds its local semiotic equivalent in a configured "ruler-minister hierarchy" (*Ju Chen Deng Ji*), integrating biopower discourse with Chinese ethical cosmology. Similarly, Lacan's "mirror stage"—the child's jubilant misrecognition of self-coherence—finds its cultural counterpoint in configured "rectification of names" (*Zheng Ming*), where social-identity coherence is achieved through ethical naming. Both frameworks interrogate the self's ontological instability: Lacan's through libidinal fragmentation, configured ethics through moral misalignment. Thus, when Xin's fragmented reflection on the iron fence cuts his face into alternating light and shadow, it visualizes simultaneously Lacanian imaginary fragmentation and configured ethical dissonance—his mirrored self oscillating between shame and righteousness, illusion and repentance.



Figure 6.5.1

6.5.2 Case study 2: Cumulative Amplification Effect of Trauma Flashbacks

This section examines the recurring flashbacks of the murder scene in “Dead End” through a tripartite analytical framework that integrates cognitive psychology, psychoanalysis, and cultural-philosophical critique in order to clarify both the mechanisms and the meanings of traumatic memory. Rather than treating trauma simply as a psychological symptom or a narrative motif, the analysis conceptualizes it as a multilayered cinematic operation in which perceptual processes, unconscious temporality, and ethical narration mutually reinforce one another. Methodologically, the discussion proceeds from the neurocognitive encoding of sensory fragments, through the psychoanalytic structure of belatedness and the unrepresentable, and finally toward the culturally configured narrative reshaping of guilt and responsibility. A central objective is to refine theoretical application by establishing explicit correspondences between Lacanian concepts and the film’s concrete audiovisual strategies, thereby grounding abstract psychoanalytic claims in verifiable cinematic form.

At the most immediate level of perception, the film’s rendering of Xin’s flashbacks accords closely with established cognitive models of traumatic memory formation. Trauma research demonstrates that extreme stress disrupts hippocampal integration and prevents the formation of coherent episodic narratives, leading instead to the storage of isolated sensory traces. As van der Kolk observes, overwhelming events are frequently encoded not as linguistically structured memories but as “speechless” fragments—images, sounds, bodily sensations that return without context or sequence (van der Kolk 2014, 182). “Dead End” translates this neurocognitive mechanism directly into film language. Xin’s early recollections do not unfold as continuous scenes but appear as disjointed perceptual shards: the metallic glint of a knife caught in rainlight, the amplified sound of water striking asphalt, a fleeting glimpse of hands grappling in darkness, the abrupt flash of a naked corpse, and heavy, irregular breathing layered over ambient noise. These shots are presented through rapid cuts without establishing space, stable framing, or causal transitions. The absence of spatial orientation and temporal continuity prevents the viewer from constructing a coherent diegetic environment, formally replicating the disintegration of memory consolidation described by trauma psychology. The flashback is thus experienced not as recollection but as sensory intrusion.

Importantly, these fragments are not static residues of the past but are subject to ongoing reconstruction. Cognitive theorists such as Neisser argue that remembering is an active, present-oriented process shaped by current emotional states and interpretive frameworks rather than a simple retrieval of stored data (Neisser 1967). Each recurrence of the murder scene in the film incorporates additional or altered details: CPR attempts that were previously absent, slightly clearer spatial relations, or faces that appear momentarily legible before dissolving again into blur. This gradual accumulation produces what may be described as a “snowballing” or cumulative amplification effect. Schacter’s notion of narrativization is particularly useful here: the mind assembles scattered fragments into a provisional story, filling gaps through inference and imagination (Schacter 1996, 73). Yet because Xin’s present affective state is dominated by guilt, terror, and self-reproach, this reconstruction is systematically distorted. The film visualizes these distortions through symbolic exaggerations—such as the

overwhelming sensation of drowning suggested by intensified water sounds and submerged acoustics—and through projective displacements, most notably the persistent obscuration of faces, which prevents stable identification of either victim or perpetrator. Memory therefore becomes both more detailed and less reliable: the past grows more vivid even as it becomes more hallucinatory.

This instability explains the intrusive temporality of the flashbacks. Because the fragments lack semantic integration into autobiographical narrative, they cannot be voluntarily recalled or dismissed; instead, they erupt unpredictably into the present. The first flashback appears shortly after the film begins, without psychological preparation or narrative justification, interrupting ongoing action with a violent montage of panic-stricken youths, the corpse, and chaotic struggle. The abrupt insertion of these images into otherwise linear scenes exemplifies the way traumatic memory bypasses conscious control. Such intrusions intensify Xin's anxiety and disorientation while also demonstrating how traumatic traces may displace other memories, functioning simultaneously as substitutes and triggers. In this sense, the film's editing structure itself becomes a formal analogue of trauma's cognitive mechanics.

While the cognitive perspective clarifies how the memory is encoded and reconstructed, it cannot fully account for the peculiar temporality and representational limits that characterize these sequences. Psychoanalysis becomes necessary at this juncture, particularly in order to explain why the past returns not simply as incomplete knowledge but as an encounter with something fundamentally unassimilable. Freud's notion of *Nachträglichkeit*, or belatedness, proposes that trauma is not experienced fully at the moment of occurrence but only retroactively through repetitive returns that confer meaning after the fact. Cathy Caruth further emphasizes that trauma is constituted by this very structure of deferred understanding: the event is grasped only through its compulsive reappearance (Caruth 1996, 11). Xin's psyche is thus caught in a loop in which the past is neither concluded nor symbolically mastered. Chronological time advances, yet psychic time remains arrested. The flashbacks fracture the film's linear narrative, creating temporal ruptures in which past and present collapse into one another.

It is here that Lacan's theory provides a more precise conceptual vocabulary, and the film's formal strategies allow these concepts to be concretely substantiated rather than merely invoked. Lacan defines the Real as that which resists symbolization and cannot be fully integrated into the symbolic order of language and representation (Lacan 1977, 55). In "Dead End", this resistance is rendered visually through systematic strategies of obscurity. Faces are frequently out of focus or partially blocked by darkness; the camera lingers on peripheral details rather than explanatory views; sound design overwhelms dialogue with noise; and spatial continuity disintegrates. These aesthetic choices do not simply signify confusion but function as formal correlates of the Real's inassimilability. The traumatic kernel of the murder cannot be clearly seen or narrated because, structurally, it exceeds representation. The viewer's frustration in trying to "see what really happened" mirrors Xin's own inability to symbolize the event. The blur, distortion, and sensory overload thus operate as cinematic translations of the Real's theoretical status.

Similarly, Lacan's concept of the gaze can be grounded in the film's specific cinematography. In Seminar XI, Lacan argues that the gaze is not identical with the subject's act of looking but is an objectifying point in the field of the Other from which the subject is already seen; "in the scopic field, the gaze is outside, I am looked at" (Lacan 1981, 72). This reversal of visual mastery is materialized in the flashback sequences. Instead of presenting stable point-of-view shots that would grant Xin epistemic control over the scene, the camera adopts claustrophobic framings, unstable handheld movements, and disorienting close-ups that seem to press upon him. At several moments, the camera faces him directly or approaches from ambiguous angles, creating the uncanny sensation that the scene itself observes him. He does not simply remember the murder; he appears subjected to it anew, positioned as the object of an accusing look. The memory behaves as if endowed with agency, returning to confront and judge him. Through these strategies, the film transforms Lacan's abstract proposition about the gaze into a tangible visual experience: Xin is no longer the sovereign spectator but the one captured within the visual field of the traumatic Other.

Yet the significance of these flashbacks is not exhausted by cognitive or psychoanalytic explanation alone. Their ultimate meaning emerges within a broader cultural and ethical narrative configuration that organizes how guilt, responsibility, and redemption are imagined. The film situates trauma within a moral framework shaped by ideas of cyclical atonement and the weight of historical accountability. Within this configuration, psychological disturbance becomes inseparable from ethical imbalance. Xin's compulsive recollections represent a pathological excess—a surplus of unprocessed past that overwhelms the present—while total forgetting would constitute an equally problematic deficiency. The narrative therefore seeks neither repression nor erasure but a mediated equilibrium. The characters' prolonged attempts at redemption—caring for Weiba, performing clandestine acts of kindness, assuming responsibility for consequences—function as practical efforts to metabolize memory through ethical action. Trauma is not cured by insight alone but must be transformed through conduct. This moral logic also imposes a distinctive temporality that contrasts sharply with the recursive time of trauma. The notion of time as irreversible flow, evoked by the classical phrase “逝者如斯夫,” suggests ethical progression and forward movement, whereas flashbacks trap Xin in repetitive stasis. The film's recurring water imagery visually condenses this dialectic. Rain, blood, and the reservoir simultaneously signify linear passage and engulfing return: water flows forward yet can also drown and submerge. These ambivalent images mirror the tension between historical continuity and traumatic fixation. The final resolution—Xin's sacrificial death and Yi's adoption of Weiba—does not erase the past but redistributes its burden. Trauma is ethically transposed rather than annulled. Healing thus appears not as psychic cleansing but as the conscious assumption of responsibility and the integration of memory into a renewed cycle of care.

By synthesizing cognitive, psychoanalytic, and cultural perspectives, the film's flashbacks can therefore be understood as a cumulative and structurally complex textual operation. They function simultaneously as perceptual fragments produced by disrupted encoding, as

encounters with the Lacanian Real and the objectifying gaze that exceed representation, and as narratively shaped elements within a culturally specific moral economy. The concrete linkage between Lacan's theoretical propositions and the film's formal devices—blurring, sensory overload, unstable camerawork, and subjective immersion—demonstrates that trauma here is not merely thematic content but an organizing principle embedded in cinematic form itself. Through this integration, “Dead End” interrogates the fragility of memory, the limits of visual knowledge, and the arduous process through which ethical continuity may be reconstructed after catastrophic moral failure.

6.5.3 Case Study 3: The Ending's Ethical Aporia

In the conclusion of “Dead End,” director Cao Baoping profoundly deconstructs and reconfigures the fatalism traditionally associated with film noir. Rather than presenting punishment as the inevitable moral closure demanded by the genre, the film transforms the execution of Xin into a prolonged scene of ethical ambiguity in which judgment, responsibility, and redemption cease to align. Lasting three minutes and fifty seconds, the sequence meticulously traces Xin's passage from resistance to resignation, but it does so through a style of clinical detachment that refuses emotional catharsis. The camera remains largely static and observational, avoiding dramatic music or rapid montage. Instead, it records the procedural details of death with unsettling precision: the tightening of restraints, the disinfecting of skin, the slow insertion of the syringe, and the visible drip of chemicals entering the bloodstream. By emphasizing duration and procedure over spectacle, the scene renders execution less as moral retribution than as bureaucratic administration of life and death.

This departure begins with a transformation of noir's visual grammar. Classical noir aesthetics rely on stark chiaroscuro lighting to delineate moral binaries, using shadow to divide the world into zones of guilt and innocence. By contrast, Cao employs diffuse, low-contrast illumination. The ceiling's soft half-light spreads evenly across the chamber, flattening spatial depth and blurring distinctions between foreground and background. Faces are neither fully lit nor fully obscured but suspended within an indeterminate gray. This lighting design visually postpones moral judgment, confirming Naremore's observation that when shadows cease to define clear boundaries, the viewer's ethical evaluation remains suspended within ambiguity (Naremore 1998, 47). Narratively, the film likewise subverts noir convention. Rather than affirming the genre's familiar contract that “crime must be punished,” the reflective voice-over delivered by Yi—“They deserved a better ending”—directly contradicts the court's sentence. This disjunction fractures what Telotte identifies as noir's moral determinism, in which legal punishment traditionally restores narrative order (Telotte 1989, 134). Law declares closure; narration insists on lingering injustice. Through this tension, “Dead End” relocates noir ethics from fatalistic causality to a contemporary landscape of doubt and moral hesitation.

The execution scene further develops this hesitation through a *mise-en-scène* that frames death as a ritualized performance of configured moral restraint. Here the concept of narrative-driven moral configuration becomes legible through concrete cinematic form rather than abstract ethical discourse. Xin's movements are slow, measured, and deliberately controlled. Before

sitting, he straightens his posture; once bound, he aligns his shoulders instead of resisting. The camera alternates between medium shots of his restrained body and reverse shots of observing officials, producing what Sobchack terms a “moral-ethical reverse shot” between the individual and the social body (Sobchack 2004, 286). This shot–reverse-shot structure materializes a reciprocal visibility: the state watches Xin, yet he simultaneously presents himself to be watched, performing composure as if enacting an internalized code of discipline. Sound design intensifies this ritual quality. Ambient noise is reduced to faint mechanical hums and subdued footsteps; dialogue is sparse and hushed. The near-silence evokes the atmosphere of ceremony rather than punishment. Through these formal strategies—measured pacing, symmetrical framing, minimal sound—the sequence constructs execution as a modern ritual structure, suggesting that patterned form imposes symbolic meaning upon otherwise unbearable suffering.

Within this framework, physical restraint paradoxically signifies interior autonomy. Xin’s bound hands and steady breathing indicate not merely submission but the internalization of discipline. His calmness performs what the narrative frames as embodied moral integrity—an ideal of self-mastery sustained until death. A paradox thus emerges: the moment of ultimate negation by society simultaneously becomes the individual’s ultimate act of ethical affirmation. Death is no longer represented as the traumatic endpoint described by Caruth, where the event remains resistant to integration (Caruth 1996, 4–5), but instead appears as a condensed crystallization of ethical time, a final gesture through which guilt and responsibility are narratively organized. Capital punishment therefore becomes a theater in which legality and morality intersect without ever fully coinciding.

This configured ethic is further complicated through Xin’s relationship with his foster daughter, Weiba. The film refuses to romanticize their bond. His initial decision to adopt her is partly motivated by concealment of guilt, undermining any purely idealistic interpretation. Yet as genuine attachment develops, his eventual acceptance of death becomes oriented toward securing her future. What emerges is not transcendent righteousness but a dialectical reconciliation of conflicting drives—self-interest and care, evasion and responsibility. Redemption thus appears as a fragile equilibrium rather than absolute virtue.

The convergence of this ethical framework with Lacanian psychoanalysis becomes decisive in the film’s climax, where both symbolic meaning and narrative coherence falter. The revelation that Weiba is the very child Xin once saved produces an abrupt rupture. Editing slows, reaction shots linger in silence, and speech momentarily collapses. This breakdown corresponds to what Lacan defines as the Real—“that which resists symbolization absolutely” (Lacan 1977, 213). The truth cannot be assimilated into legal or narrative language. The judicial system, as embodiment of the Symbolic Order, can assign guilt but cannot process trauma. It names crime yet fails to signify suffering.

Lacan’s “Graph of Desire” further clarifies this collapse. Xin’s belief that caring for Weiba would redeem him relied on what Lacan calls a fantasmatic anchoring of desire to a privileged signifier (Lacan 2006, 690–693). Weiba functioned as the signifier of salvation within both his psyche and the narrative’s symbolic logic. Yet this fantasy merely displaced trauma rather than

resolving it. Once the truth emerges, the fixed signifier dissolves, and the fantasy structure collapses. Redemption is exposed not as ontological certainty but as a fragile symbolic construction. Here the two frameworks illuminate one another: narrative-driven moral configuration provides the culturally specific content of the fantasy—sacrifice, paternal duty, atonement—while Lacanian theory explains structurally why such symbolic formations inevitably fracture upon contact with the Real.

For this reason, the ending of “Dead End” ultimately refuses closure. Neither legal punishment nor personal sacrifice fully accounts for the past. Instead of resolving contradictions, the film foregrounds their irreducibility. What remains is not reconciliation but an ethical aporia: a condition in which competing moral logics—juridical justice, narrative redemption, and traumatic truth—cannot be synthesized into a coherent system. By exposing the limits of both the symbolic order and its own configured moral universe, “Dead End” transcends genre fatalism and offers a meditation on the fragility of justice, the instability of redemptive narratives, and the human confrontation with that which escapes all representation.

Chapter 7 Rashōmon in Rural China: Non-linear Narration¹²⁶ and the “Ethical Suspension” in “Cock and Bull” 追凶者也 (2016)

7.1 Introduction

Scenario

A motorcycle cab driver, Cat (猫哥), was found dead in the wilderness in a village on the border of Yunnan province, his body having been struck in the head with a blunt object, and a bloody dagger was left at the scene. Song Laoer 宋老二, an auto mechanic, was identified as the suspect by the deceased's wife because of a quarrel he had with the deceased over their children.

To prove his innocence, Song started to hunt for the murderer alone. He drove his truck in the direction the murderer fled, and found the murderer's white suit jacket in an abandoned mine cave, containing a vague nightclub receipt. Song repaired the deceased's motorcycle, he believes that to find the bike will find the murderer. In the village-to-household searching he coincidentally finds Wang Youquan 王友全. Wang thought it was because he stole the motorcycle. To avoid pursuit, Wang fled to his girlfriend. Later, Song chased to the hotel to tell Wang's girlfriend that he is a murderer, the girlfriend to protect him, pretending to arrange him to go outside to work. Subsequently, on the way Wang meet Dong Xiaofeng 董小凤, who is also looking for him, gradually they recognized each other's identity, and started a fierce fight.

In another clue, Dong, a nightclub foreman, was cheated out of half his life savings for purchasing a house. To repay his debt, he was hired by the mine owner to assassinate Song. He sneaks into Song's home with a dagger, but mistakenly kills Cat because he lost the photo. Dong lost the motorbike(which was stolen by wang) with his jacket on the back seat.

Wang was interrogated by Song, revealed that he picked up the motorcycle, and insisted that he only stole the motorcycle, never killed anyone. The truth is gradually revealed, Song and Wang decide to work together to hunt down Dong.

In the course of the investigation, Song discovers that there is a hidden agenda behind the conflict over the relocation of the graves: to reduce the cost of demolition and relocation, the mine owner intends to force the villagers to compromise by creating rumors of a “Murder

¹²⁶ The “non-linear narration” here operates with a different logic from the classic Rashomon model. While Rashomon deconstructs a single, fixed event through contradictory retellings, this film employs a non-linear, multi-perspective structure to chronicle a causal chain of events (murder, flight, pursuit). Each segment from the viewpoints of Wang, Dong, and Song not only reveals a different facet of the story but, crucially, advances the plot by triggering and explaining subsequent actions. Thus, the non-linearity progressively expands and complicates the entire narration sequence, moving beyond the reinterpretation of a singular incident to depict an evolving, interconnected moral dilemma.

House”¹²⁷. Dong, to fulfill his employer's mission, sneaks into the village again and tries to kill, but his whereabouts are exposed by the surveillance camera. The police located Dong's hideout, and he is eventually killed in the fight. The tape recorder he carries reveals the mine owner's murder plan.

“Cock and Bull” is a crime narration film that wraps rural violence in the guise of absurdist dark comedy. However, its most striking artistic strategy lies not in depicting violence itself, but in its highly structured nonlinear storytelling. Through intersecting perspectives of multiple characters, repeated presentation of key events, and deliberate disruption of chronological order, the film constructs a fragmented narration space where the truth remains suspended. Within this structure, the truth does not gradually clarify as the plot unfolds—instead, it grows increasingly ambiguous with each subjective retelling. At the same time, moral judgment is constantly neutralized by conflicting viewpoints, leaving it perpetually unsettled.

Cao Baoping's structural choice serves as his method of coldly observing the ethical system of rural society. In the film, the three main characters—Wang Youquan, a petty thug; Dong Xiaofeng, a professional hitman; and Song Laoer, a stubborn villager wrongly accused—each embody, in their own ways, how the survival logic of the underclass dismantles established morality: Wang's boastful lie about owning a motorcycle reflects the identity anxiety of marginalized youth; Dong justifies murder with the ruthless logic of “getting paid to do a job,” exposing how capital dehumanizes; and Song, obstinately guarding his late wife's grave, becomes entangled in a homicide case—his pursuit of the killer is both an attempt to clear his name and a rebellion against rural power structures. In this process, the so-called “truth” gradually recedes into a mere structural device. At the same time, the real focus shifts to the collapse of ethical order in China's rural society during its transitional period—when monetary gain, clan relations, and survival pressure replace benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trust as guiding principles, any judgment based on conventional moral frameworks appears utterly powerless.

The narration strategy of “Cock and Bull” is thus not merely a formal experiment—it embeds, at its structural core, a critical observation of the collapse of values in contemporary rural China. The film never explicitly declares what constitutes “justice”. Instead, through the misdirection of the motorcycle clue, the delayed revelation of the employer's identity, and the contradictions in eyewitness testimonies, it sustains a state of judgmental irresolution. This structural deferral of moral certainty is more than just a suspenseful device for the audience; it is a narration manifestation of the failure of established morality under the pressures of capital-driven violence and systemic power—when Dong's murder-for-hire, Cat's wife's false accusation for compensation, and the factory owner's grave conspiracy collectively fuel the crimes, the communal ideal of “poetic justice” (善恶有报) is already crushed by the logic of reality.

¹²⁷ Chinese written as “凶宅”, which means the house that people who lives in will get hunted by all kinds of ghosts whom were murdered but without an acceptable or reasonable afterwards justice.

The nonlinear narration of “Cock and Bull” operates through temporal manipulation, perspectival shifts, and deliberate information concealment—formal strategies that structurally impede ethical judgment. These narration impediments mirror the functional disintegration of the social-ethical framework centered on 仁义礼智信¹²⁸ (benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and fidelity) within contemporary rural society. In the film, nonlinear narration and moral ambiguity are not merely parallel concerns; they are entwined and mutually reinforcing, shaping a cinematic logic where form and meaning collapse into uncertainty.

Behind the fragmented structure of “Cock and Bull” lies a profound resonance with the narration paradox revealed by the “Rashomon effect”: when multiple subjective accounts are juxtaposed, 'truth' not only becomes unverifiable but is eroded through relentless rhetorical repetition. Yet unlike Kurosawa's original work—which grounds its philosophical agnosticism in the Buddhist concept of mappō, where “the old verities are no longer valid” (Richie 1996, 74), and an existentialist epistemology that “rejects any absolute or stable ground for truth” (Goodwin 1994, 58)—“Cock and Bull” executes a deliberate localization of the “Rashomon effect”, endowing it with distinct socio-ethical functions and cultural-psychological significance.

Structurally, “Cock and Bull” formally inherits “Rashomon”'s multi-perspective framework and its mechanism of non-linear narration for pivotal events. Centering on a seemingly mundane rural homicide, the film revisits the core narration sequence—murder, flight, pursuit—through the lenses of its three protagonists: Wang, Dong, and Song. Each retelling not only supplements information omitted from prior perspectives but also introduces new motivational interpretations and moral shading. Much like how the conflicting testimonies of the bandit, the samurai's wife, and the deceased samurai's spirit in “Rashomon” mutually undermine one another, however, in “Dead End”, its narration structure generates analogous contradictions and plot entanglements, perpetually confining the audience within a context where definitive judgment remains suspended.

Yet “Cock and Bull” transcends mere formal imitation. Within its cultural framework and ethical context, the film reorganizes “Rashomon-style narration” through a Sinicized lens. The most striking divergence manifests in the characterization of motives and the transformation of narration stances. In “Rashomon”, each storyteller is driven by performative exhibitionism and self-justification, obscuring truth through meticulously crafted language to defend human dignity. In contrast, most narrators in “Cock and Bull” lack such existential anxiety, instead demonstrating behavior governed by pragmatic logic and socially conditioned impulses: Wang's lie (falsely claiming ownership of the motorcycle) stems not from self-defense but from an underdog's transient craving for vanity; Dong, the contract killer, rationalizes homicide as mere business, motivated by the practical pressures of buying his wife's freedom and securing

¹²⁸ It refers to the five fundamental moral principles upheld in Confucianism—benevolence (仁), righteousness (义), propriety (礼), wisdom (智), and integrity (信)—which have been esteemed by Confucian scholars across generations and constitute the core framework of the Confucian ethical system.

domestic stability; Song's pursuit of the killer interweaves self-vindication, resistance against local power structures, and paternal concerns for his son's future.

Through this collage of perspectives, the film ultimately reveals not philosophical "nihilism of truth"¹²⁹ but a societal "collapse of moral judgment": Cat's accidental killing stems from his employer's (Song's childhood friend) cold-blooded scheme to remove obstacles for factory expansion; Song's wrongful accusation exposes the intricate web of interpersonal relationships and conflicting interests in rural society; Dong's tragedy epitomizes the powerless struggles of the underclass against structural oppression.

The core of this transformation lies in cultural divergences between ethical systems. In the Japanese context, "Rashomon" employs "human deceit" to metaphorize "life's impermanence", culminating in the symbolic redemption of adopting the abandoned infant. "Cock and Bull", however, presents a rural moral configuration that has deviated but not collapsed—a system where moral boundaries become blurred yet remain recognizable. The film features no absolute "savior" nor absolute "evil"; each character navigates their own moral compromises, attempting to reconcile their questionable actions through personalized interpretations of core virtues — particularly the cultivation of Ren (benevolence), the embodiment of Yi (righteousness), the practice of Li (propriety), and the discernment of Shi/Fei (right/wrong). Rather than being trapped, these characters actively engage with the hierarchical ethical web, adapting its principles to justify their survival in a complex social reality. Here, the "Rashomon structure" ceases to function merely as a metaphor for human depravity, instead becoming a narration mechanism that reveals the flexibility and resilience of ethical reasoning in marginal communities. Truth remains multifaceted not because the ethical framework has collapsed, but because it has evolved to accommodate competing legitimate claims.

Moreover, "Cock and Bull" intensifies its localized adaptation through distinctly Chinese linguistic and stylistic choices. The film employs heavy regional dialects, comically rendered police-criminal confrontations, and deliberately "unheroic" characterizations, steering its narration tone away from weighty philosophical contemplation toward the absurdist mundanity of China's grassroots reality. This "ethical collapse wrapped in dark comedy" creates a cultural tenor starkly different from "Rashomon"'s tragic, metaphysical overtones—one that better aligns with the Chinese moral psyche's tendency to "grieve without despair"¹³⁰ and "seek order within chaos". Thus, the film's localization of the "Rashomon effect" transcends formal polyphony and narration entanglement; it fundamentally reconstructs the cultural mechanics of ethical judgment. In a society where ethics have destabilized and order remains unformed, structural uncertainty and moral suspension become mutually reinforcing. This Sinicized "Rashomon-style" narration ceases to ask "what is truth", instead using perpetually failing judgments to expose the moral anxieties and institutional fissures within a rural society undergoing modernization.

¹²⁹ 真理虚无 this term is avoiding confusion with general "relativism".

¹³⁰ 哀而不伤 it's a kind of Confucian *moderation* principle.

Here, nonlinear narration evolves beyond formal experimentation into a covert tool for deconstructing the mythic structures of power that sustain ethical orthodoxy. By fragmenting a rural homicide into narration shards controlled by different characters, the film ensures "truth" can never be linearly reassembled. While superficially generating suspense, this structure's deeper function is to mount a multi-angled challenge to the established ethical axis underpinning social order. In rural China, ethics are never abstract principles but lived emotional hierarchies and identity-bound obligations (Yan 2003, 248). When conventional virtues (Ren, Yi, Li, Zhi, Xin) fail to provide consistent behavioral standards, and moral responsibility keeps shifting with perspective, nonlinear narration transforms from rhetorical technique into a penetrating apparatus for critique.

This shift manifests first in deliberate structural asymmetries of information. The three primary narration strands—the wrongly killed Cat, hitman Dong, and avenger Song—each offer limited, subjective accounts: Cat's death itself becomes a narration void, with his wife's accusations (against Song) constituting a passive "narration"; Dong consistently masks violence under "business" pragmatism (his girlfriend's freedom ransom); Song's pursuit interweaves self-exoneration, resistance to local power, and paternal anxiety. Characters' selective memories and omissions create a structural vacuum for moral judgment, not from audience incompetence, but through calculated incompleteness (e.g. delayed revelation of Cat's accidental killing). Consequently, ethical evaluation can only build on unstable narration ground.

Crucially, this informational asymmetry metaphorizes the crumbling logic of rural social ethics. Established moral judgment relied on fixed identity relations and situational presumptions—like a father shielding his son, overriding legal duty, or the noble man's (君子) self-consistency in solitude. Yet the film's perspective-switching and temporal fractures disrupt these automatic ethical priorities. Dong's "professional" justification for murder (just business) collapses when Song exposes the factory expansion scheme behind it. Similarly, Cat's wife's vendetta against Song, framed as a personal grievance, reveals itself as an interest-driven fabrication when contextualized. This mutually canceling narration mechanism systematically challenges the applicability of communal ethics, exposing their inability to maintain moral coherence in a reality dominated by self-interest.

From a narratological perspective, this structural suspension of judgment stems from the interplay of what Gérard Genette terms Internal Focalization and Variable Narration Zoom (Genette 1980, 189-194). The film deliberately restricts "information" flow through each character's subjective lens: Wang's lie about the motorcycle, Dong's concealment of his murder plan, and Song's misreading of investigative clues all confine the audience to partial knowledge rather than omniscient certainty. This focalization mechanism generates repetitive retellings of events, yet each retelling merely adds new fragments to a fractured map whose overall shape remains irrecoverable. Technically, the strategy achieves cognitive delay; ethically, it translates into judgmental collapse, not due to audience incompetence, but because the narration systematically withholds the unified social motivations (money, power) that moral evaluation requires.

Ethically, such “judgmental failure” transcends narration contrivance to mirror the disintegration of moral authority in rural China. The film’s cardinal virtues—embodied in patriarchal elders, lineage heads, and local officials who once mediated justice through *li* (ritual propriety) and *ren* (benevolence)—no longer exert cohesive power. As Fei observes, rural moral order in pre-modern China was grounded in “a web of differential modes of association” (Fei 1992, 64) where senior males exercised symbolic and ethical authority through kinship and ritual. Yet, these figures, once the moral representatives of communal virtue, are now depicted as complicit in pragmatic negotiations or displaced by the rise of economic rationality and individual survivalism.

Consequently, characters no longer act under the constraints of conventional virtues but instead operate through pragmatic codes of profit, self-preservation, and kinship obligation. This ethical fragmentation voids old morality’s normative force: the hitman’s professionalism and Cat’s Wife’s false accusation defy simple moral categorization, as both are underwritten by culturally legible practical rationalities (family security for the killer, economic gain for the accuser). Such ambiguity not only complicates moral assessment but destabilizes the very mechanisms of symbolic power—the patriarchal, ritual, and relational obligations—that once sustained the prevailing ethical system (Yan 2003, 248).

Unlike “*Rashomon*”’s existential and theological agnosticism, ethical of “*Cock and Bull*” void expresses a distinctly material anxiety: the problem is not an inability to judge, but the loss of stable criteria within profit-driven power structures. This cultural distinction nourishes the Sinicized “*Rashomon* schema”. Here, nonlinear narration evolves from a rhetorical device into an apparatus of societal critique—no longer questioning the epistemology of truth, but systematically exposing institutional injustice and ethical decay.

Based on the film “*Cock and Bull*”, I propose a new conceptual framework to define the distinctive narration mode employed in such texts where storytelling and ethics are profoundly intertwined - the “Ethical Suspension Narration”. This term emphasizes how, under the dominance of nonlinear narration strategies, moral judgment is not merely delayed or obscured, but structurally engineered into a state of “undecidability”, forcing audiences to navigate multiple subjective versions rather than providing clear ethical binaries. This narration mechanism differs fundamentally from nihilistic expressions in Western postmodern cinema. Rather than denying the possibility of morality itself, it presents a social reality where “moral judgment is systematically postponed”, reflecting the disjunction between rural ethical practices and modern narration cognition.

The Ethical Suspension Narration operates through three dimensions: Narratologically, it manifests through asymmetrical information structures and shifting focalization mechanisms; Ethically, it exposes the failure of established moral principles when confronted with relational complexities and mixed motivations; Comparatively, while bearing resemblance to the “*Rashomon*-style epistemic uncertainty”, it particularly emphasizes the distortion and collapse of socially embedded ethical orders. This narration form not only reveals the asymmetrical relationship between “truth” and “justice” in rural society, but also demonstrates Cao Baoping’s

attempt to formally express the inherent tensions within prevailing cultural systems through narration architecture.

Ultimately, nonlinear narration serves not merely as a tool for reconstructing reality, but as a culturally situated critical pathway: its structural complexity lies bare ethical disorder, while the very difficulty of moral judgment becomes the most authentic representation of this social system.

7.2 The "Structural Tension" between Nonlinear Narrations and Relational-Situational Ethics

In the multifaceted expression of cinematic art, narrative structure serves as the skeletal framework that supports a work's textual fabric and conceptual core, while ethical conceptions function like its lifeblood, imbuing it with cultural depth and spiritual resonance. These two elements are so interwoven that they collectively shape a film's intellectual depth. In this context, ethics refers to the moral dynamics through which individuals, situated within complex social relations and extreme circumstances, enact responsibility based on *Ren* (inner moral sentiment) as a core affective drive, mediated by *Yi* (contextual wisdom in judgment) as a mechanism of discernment, and manifested through *Yi* (relational and role-based propriety) as the structure of obligation. This triadic configuration frames ethics as a process of emotionally grounded yet situationally adaptive decision-making, often marked by tension and contradiction (Fei 1992, 64; Tu 1985, 23; Ge 2011, 211). Cao's "Cock and Bull" stands as a work in which the dynamic interplay between narrative structure and this relational-situational ethical paradigm generates distinctive artistic force, exhibiting a subtle yet profound structural tension between its nonlinear narration and a moral logic rooted in *Ren*, *Yi*, and *Li*.

From a narratological perspective, "Cock and Bull" subverts the linear cause-and-effect paradigm typical of conventional crime films. Instead, it employs a tripartite perspectival narration to deliberately create systematic informational asymmetry, keeping viewers in a sustained state of Cognitive Dissonance¹³¹. This nonlinear approach not only challenges established storytelling conventions but also triggers profound ethical reverberations. The film's relational-situational ethic presupposes a form of moral coherence attainable through contextual judgment, yet its multi-version event narrations systematically deconstruct this very possibility.

The director intensifies this tension through artistic techniques such as fragmented chronology and the symbolic repetition of key props. The fractured timeline disrupts the familiar 因果链 of rural storytelling, metaphorizing the instability of a ritual-governed social order. Meanwhile, the contradictory meanings attached to key props (e.g., the motorcycle) across different narrative segments vividly demonstrate how objective facts are recoded within the "differential mode of association" (差序格局) by intricate relational networks (人情网络). The following

¹³¹ 认知失衡 It is a psychological state characterized by discomfort and tension arising when an individual simultaneously holds two or more conflicting cognitive elements, such as beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, or behaviors.

analysis will delve into how this structural tension between nonlinear narration and relational-situational ethics manifests concretely in the film.

The film adopts a tripartite-perspectival narration, unfolding the story successively from the viewpoints of Wang, Dong, and Song, thereby constructing a systematic information asymmetry (Grodal 1997, 89). This keeps the audience in a constant state of “cognitive dissonance” (Festinger 1957, 156) throughout the viewing process. This narrative strategy not only subverts the linear temporal-causal logic underlying traditional crime genres but also deconstructs the moral certainty associated with a communal ethic of “integrity as self-actualization”¹³² by presenting multiple, mutually contradictory versions of the same event. In doing so, the film enacts a nonlinear ordering of events (Sternberg 1993, 159) that foregrounds the manipulative power of narrative temporality.

7.2.1 Polyphonic Narration and the Deconstruction of Communal Integrity Ethics

The tripartite perspective narration (Bordwell 1985, 156) employed in “Cock and Bull” is fully demonstrated in Wang's segment of the film. In this 20-minute narration unit, the director establishes a comprehensive system of cognitive subversion through differentiated presentations of two key scenes:

The motorcycle robbery from Wang's point of view appears in a sequence called “Xiaolanshi”¹³³. The camera follows Wang and his girlfriend as they intentionally ride the motorcycle fast down the highway. When his girlfriend asks where it came from, Wang lies and says he borrowed it from a friend. On his way home, he encounters a downpour and happens to take shelter at Song's mechanic store, where the one square and one round rearview mirror (Figure 7.2.1) is emphasized through a close-up take. Song recognizes it at the moment Wang leaves after the rain stops and immediately drives behind Wang on his way home. When he gets home Wang has already communicated over the phone about selling the motorcycle, later when Song chases after him he thinks it's the owner and abandons it in a panic. He eventually learned from his girlfriend that the owner had been killed and he was mistaken for the murderer. Many details in this scene create the image of a “persecuted person”. This

¹³² 诚者自成 It originates from Confucian thought, implying that genuine sincerity leads to inner harmony and the full realization of one's moral nature.

¹³³ “Xiaolanshi” (小烂屎), a special term in Yunnan slang, usually refers to women with questionable lifestyles or a lot of affairs, it is absolutely highly insulting. As the legend goes, when the American Volunteer Group, AVG assisted China, the airbase set up in Southwest China was in Kunming, and after they finished protecting the Hump Course, the biggest entertainment was to look for women. At that time, outside the airbase, there were often some heavily made-up women standing far away from the airbase, waving their handkerchiefs as soon as they saw the AVG members, while those guys ran over to them shouting “Nice, nice!” The local people did not understand English, and over time, they called those prostitute-like women “Lanshi” according to the pronunciation. Nowadays, this term is also used as a curse to express a feeling of dissatisfaction, regardless of the gender of the subject. In “Cock and Bull”, this expression not only conveys Song's dissatisfaction with Wang, whom he believes to be the real culprit, but also serves as a title to summarize the meaning of the segment. To a certain extent, it structures the narration framework of the film. The above explanations are based on widely circulated folklore and historical contexts. The origins and evolution of such terms are often passed down through orality and folklore, thus making it difficult to find an exact documentary source. The explanations in the article are derived from verbal explanations given by local people.

affective guidance (Smith 1995, 112) makes the audience naturally accept the preconception of Wang's innocence.



Figure 7.2.1



Figure 7.2.2

Yet in Dong's reminiscence paragraph, the truth is revealed. The motorcycle robbery begins with a long distant shot of Wang singing as he emerges from the other side under the bridge. In this sequence, he walks with both hands dangling randomly, his dyed blonde hair highlighted by the dark blue jacket, humming and singing the popular song "Little Girl Under the Streetlamp"¹³⁴ (Hey, little girl, don't don't cry...) which is highly popular in the Chinese-speaking world (Figure 7.2.2). The scene is a moment rich in dramatic tension and dark humor, carefully crafted to enhance both character development and the film's narration atmosphere. To begin with, this behavior reinforces Wang's streetwise persona and the absurdity of his actions. As a petty, idle drifter at the bottom of society, his choice to hum a nostalgic disco hit

¹³⁴ 路灯下的小女孩 It's a famous Chinese disco song "Little Girl Under the Streetlamp" (also known as "Hey! Little Girl". It's adapted from "Brother Louie" by the German band Modern Talking.

from the 1980s—brimming with kitsch and outdated charm—immediately makes him feel vivid and authentic. This "outmoded" musical taste reflects his low cultural capital and marginalized social status. At the same time, the contrast between the cheerful tune and his intention to steal a motorcycle creates a sense of absurd humor. This juxtaposition highlights his disregard for law and morality while tonally aligning with the film's dark comedy style. Moreover, this moment subtly reveals Wang's "unconscious evil". The original lyrics—"don't don't cry", "your mother is waiting for you"—are tender and comforting, yet Wang uses the song as the soundtrack to a theft. This ironic dissonance between lyrics and action suggests his moral numbness: he is not monstrously evil but drifts into wrongdoing in a naive, thoughtless way. His casual humming also implies that the theft is impulsive rather than premeditated, further emphasizing his character as someone prone to small-time misdeeds without being truly malevolent. In addition, this scene catalyzes the film's narration of chance and fatalism. The motorcycle Wang steals happens to be a crucial piece of evidence in a murder case, making the song's insertion the starting point of his accidental entanglement in a chain of events. The cheerful music contrasts sharply with the imminent violence, reinforcing the randomness and irony of fate. Cao Baoping, known for using music to offset violent narrations (as in "Dead End"), employs the upbeat disco rhythm to ease the tension of crime, drawing the audience into laughter before the unfolding tragedy becomes apparent. Finally, the song functions as a metaphor for the era. As a symbol of the early disco craze during China's reform and opening-up period, it evokes a bygone sense of collective euphoria. Wang, however, remains stuck in that outdated fantasy, representing those left behind in a society undergoing rapid transformation. This suggests a spiritual void among the forgotten lower classes. Far from being a random nostalgic insert, the song uses the contrast between music and action to portray Wang as both laughable and pitiable—a "small man" caught in the absurdity of life. It ultimately serves the film's darkly comic tone and narration logic of accidental entrapment, embodying Cao Baoping's signature style of "absurd realism", which uses irony to expose the survival conditions of those at society's margins.



Figure 7.2.3

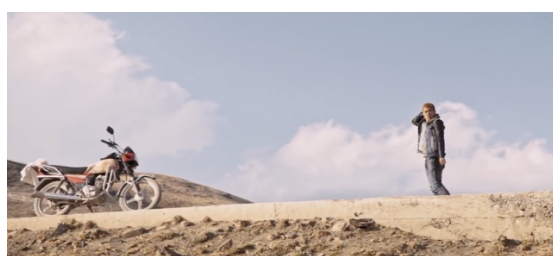


Figure 7.2.4

He stumbled on the gravel of the riverbank towards the direction of the crime scene where Dong killed Cat. Upon discovery, Dong panicked, threw away his dagger, leaned over and dragged the body into a small water stream, knelt and hid behind a large rock, carefully observing Wang's movements (Figure 7.2.3). Unaware of this, Wang walked towards the bridge abutment, stopped, urinated on the abutment, and walked along the bridge abutment to the freeway as if nothing had happened. Then he saw the motorcycle parked on the side, he immediately stopped humming and froze there, his eyes searched around, but did not see the owner, up to the idea of stealing the motorcycle. Dong, who was hiding behind a rock, closely

watched Wang's every move. Wang did not find anyone around the case, his hand groping the back of the head (Figure 7.2.4), eyes constantly surveying the surrounding area, small steps pacing to the motorcycle, switching to whistle again the same melody, he circled the motorcycle, and still did not find anyone. Then he hopped onto it, rode away (Figure 7.2.5). At this moment, Dong, hiding behind the rock, rejoiced at how easily he had gotten away with eliminating this evidence, completely forgetting that his jacket was still hanging on the back seat of the motorcycle. When he reacts and attempts to retrieve the jacket after Wang, however he has already disappeared in a puff of dust (Figure 7.2.6). In this scene, all the actions and details together proved Wang as a "scapegoat". This sequence begins in Dong's dimly lit hotel room, where the beads of sweat that fall onto Song's photograph as Dong struggles to hold himself up between two beds contrast brutally with the motorcycle robbery in the flashback. The director employs Cross-Cutting (Reisz 1968, 145) to juxtapose three temporal spaces: the push-up exercise, the conversation during the murder planning stage, and the first-witness perspective as the robbery is being carried out. In particular, the reappearance of the motorcycle's rearview mirror, which reflects Dong's hideous face, creates a mirror irony (Hutcheon 1994, 67) with Wang's paragraph.



Figure 7.2.5



Figure 7.2.6

The film's engagement with the prevailing ethical ideal of "integrity" (Chengxin 诚信) is not a radical deconstruction in the Derridean sense, but rather a subtle, pragmatic modification that reveals how moral principles are selectively adapted to serve individual interests. Within the established virtue system, "integrity" or Chengxin—often paired with *Zhong* (忠, loyalty)—constitutes a core dimension of moral self-cultivation and the foundation of trustworthy human relations (Tu 1985, 37). However, as Shun Kwong-loi observes, such virtues are not absolute commandments but context-dependent dispositions realized within concrete social relations (Shun 2004, 65–67). The film vividly illustrates this contextual malleability: its reconfiguration of "integrity" does not dismantle the moral ideal itself, but exposes how individuals instrumentalize sincerity to maintain emotional stability or social advantage.

This nuanced reworking of "integrity" is articulated through a Rashomon-style narration that unfolds from the perspectives of Wang, Dong, and Song (the latter will not be discussed here), each marked by strong subjectivity. For example, in Wang's account, he is mistaken for a murderer after stealing a motorbike, and the audience initially accepts his self-perceived "innocence." In Dong's recollection, however, Wang's theft appears as an accidental entanglement in the crime, and his deliberate lies—for instance, deceiving his girlfriend by claiming to have merely borrowed the motorcycle—ultimately lead to the breakdown of trust.

By juxtaposing these contradictory perspectives, the film constructs a network of informational asymmetry that mirrors the ethical ambiguity embedded in everyday moral practice. The shifting viewpoints not only challenge the linear causal logic of traditional crime narrations but also dramatize the fragmentation of moral certainty: truth and integrity become perspectival, contingent upon each character's desire for self-preservation. In this sense, the film's narration strategy—its multi-perspectival structure and temporally refracted storytelling—functions as a formal analogue to its ethical inquiry, transforming the communally-held ideal of “integrity as self-actualization” into a field of negotiation between sincerity and survival.

The characters' motivations reveal the paradox of integrity (诚) within moral dilemmas. First, Wang's petty transgression (小恶) stands in stark opposition to his grand deception (大伪). His act of stealing a motorcycle and lying about it appears as a minor moral failing, yet becomes magnified into a profound deceit due to its connection to the murder case. While his lies stem from self-preservation, they inadvertently frame Song as the prime suspect, demonstrating the collapse of the established ideal that "inner virtue matches outward conduct" (表里如一). When Wang declares at the film's climax that "honesty is the most important thing in the world", this statement forms bitter irony against his actions, laying bare how survival pressures force the underclass to compromise integrity. Second, Dong's professional dignity clashes grotesquely with his actions' absurdity. As a hitman, he attempts to maintain dignity through "professional" demeanor (wearing suits, glasses to appear refined), yet his botched assassination (killing the wrong target, losing his suit and the targeted photo) exposes the hollowness of his integrity. His self-proclaimed identity as a "five-star killer" becomes farcical due to his incompetence, satirizing the traditional notion that "self-cultivation leads to moral actualization" (成己成物)—in a morally disordered society, individuals cannot achieve integrity through self-improvement alone.

The collapse of trust caused by information asymmetry precipitates profound ethical conflicts. Through cross-cutting and mirrored irony, the film intensifies its deconstruction of integrity via multi-perspectivity. For instance, the motorcycle's rearview mirror reflects Wang's panicked face in his segment, yet captures Dong's murderous glare in his—a symbolic repetition that exposes the invisibility of integrity: truth, like the mirror's reflection, becomes distorted by shifting vantage points. Wang's wrongful identification as the murderer epitomizes how information asymmetry erodes trust: His credibility is destroyed by the motorcycle theft lie; Song is stripped of discursive power due to police bias; Dong's professional disguise annihilates his humanity. Together, they form a closed loop of failed integrity ethics, where communal sincerity collapses under systemic fractures.

Through the above analysis, we observe how the film employs multi perspectivity to reveal that truth is not an objective existence, but rather a product of power and interests. First, Wang's status as "innocent" or "guilty" depends entirely on narration perspective, thereby deconstructing the ideal of integrity ("诚") as an absolute moral truth. Second, the disconnect between characters' actions and motivations (e.g. Dong's "professional dignity" versus his farcical behavior) demonstrates how external appearances fail to reflect inner reality,

overturning the established logic that "sincerity within manifests without" (诚于中，形于外). Finally, individuals in this morally disordered society cannot achieve integrity through self-cultivation. Instead, survival pressures force them into compromise (Wang's lies, Dong's botched murder), shattering the prevailing ideal that "the sincere person perfects themselves" (诚者自成). This multi-perspective narration places the ethics of integrity in the crucible of absurd reality and moral dilemmas, ultimately exposing its fragility in the face of power, interests, and existential desperation. The film's black humor and narration sleight-of-hand not only deconstruct traditional ethics' absolutism but also pose a more profound question: When societal trust collapses, can integrity still serve as the moral foundation for individuals?

Through the narration strategy of multi-perspective collage and temporal rupture, the film weaves the murder case in the southwest border town into a temporal labyrinth full of tension (Turim 1989, 56). In the film, the dislocation between the event time (the day of the murder), the narration time (the character's recollection) and the perceived time (the audience's reception) not only deconstructs the temporal foundation of the traditional vernacular ethic, but also reveals the deep-rooted conflict between the order of propriety and the judicial process in the process of society development.

This "Rashomon" structure reconstructs the same event from the perspectives of the killer Dong, the mechanic Song and the unemployed villager Wang. This multi-perspective narration cuts the event time into fragmented segments of memory through the techniques of repetition and flashback. For example, Dong's narration time is delayed into a mockery of instrumental rationality as he is repeatedly caught in a comical dilemma during his murderous mission by losing the target's photograph and exposure of the weapon. In contrast, Song's perceptual time is distorted by anxiety and rage during the pursuit of the murderer, as he is suspected by the villagers to be a thief.

This temporal rupture narration strategy directly dismantles the linear view of time in the farming civilization. In traditional vernacular societies, time is closely linked to natural rhythms, and farmers establish a stable life rhythm through agricultural activities. However, the accidental nature of the motorcycle robberies in the film (e.g. Dong accidentally kills the mine owner, Wang steals the motorcycle and triggers a chain reaction) completely breaks this certainty. The timing of events is dominated by the "Black Swan Incidents" of the market economy, and the fate of individuals is caught up in the vortex of capital and violence.

The fracture of time first manifests in the disintegration of the "benevolent father, filial son" (父慈子孝) ethical chain. In traditional ritual-governed societies, paternal authority was consolidated through intergenerational continuity and temporal endurance. However, the film portrays an alienation of ethical relationships through Dong and Song's interactions. As a hitman, Dong's paternal role is thoroughly deconstructed by instrumental rationality: He attempts to secure material stability for his girlfriend Ping through contract killings, only to descend into madness when the plan fails. This failure of fatherhood fundamentally reflects

how market economies erode ethical bonds—when individuals channel survival anxiety into violence, the ethical chain inevitably ruptures.

More critically, Wang's character exposes another dimension of rural ethical collapse: Raised in a single-parent household, Wang grows up devoid of paternal moral guidance, leading him to equate "filial piety" (孝) with monetary pursuit. His decision to flee the village after stealing a motorcycle stems not from rebellion against patriarchy, but from escapism in the face of poverty. This severance of ethical continuity mirrors the disintegration of rural value systems amid modernization.

The fragmented narration structure further obscures the timeliness of justice. In traditional rural societies, blood vengeance adheres to the principle of "timeliness"—that is, the act of revenge must be carried out promptly within an ethical framework. However, Song's pursuit of the killer in the film reveals how judicial procedures deconstruct the temporal constraints of vengeance. When Song, suspected of being the murderer, finds himself in a moral dilemma, he attempts to resolve the issue through vigilante justice but hits an impasse due to insufficient evidence. Ultimately, the truth of the murder is uncovered through police intervention, but this process far exceeds the temporal bounds of traditional vengeance.

This ambiguity in the timeliness of justice essentially reflects the conflict between judicial procedures and the ritualistic order during modernization. In the judicial practices of the Tang Dynasty, capital cases underwent a three-tiered review process—county, prefecture, and the Dali Temple—before final approval by the emperor (referencing studies on Tang Dynasty capital punishment procedures). While such lengthy judicial procedures ensured procedural justice, they clashed with the "immediacy" demanded by blood vengeance. In the film, Dong, driven by desperation for wealth, mistakenly kills the mine owner. Though his actions stem from greed, they also subtly embody resistance against the delays inherent in judicial processes. This resistance ultimately leads to his downfall, symbolizing the anxiety individuals face regarding the timeliness of justice in the course of development.

The concluding aerial shot in the film further intensifies the modernist dilemma of temporal fragmentation and rural ethics. When technological surveillance starkly contrasts with primitive brawls, the director seeks to reveal how power structures in modernization have shifted from traditional ritual governance to technocratic domination. The drone, as a symbol of modern surveillance technology, not only dissolves individual subjectivity with its omniscient gaze but also subsumes the violent conflicts of rural society within the purview of global capital. This transformation of power structures completely subordinates the traditional ethical values of Qing (情 human sentiment) and Yi (义 righteousness) to the logic of capital.

Through its nonlinear narration and fragmented temporality, “Cock and Bull” exposes the crisis of rural ethics during the transition from agrarian society to urbanization. The collapse of cyclical farming time, the failure of ritual-based order, and the ambiguity of justice's timeliness collectively form the film's profound critique of rural transformation. As

individuals are caught in the vortex of capital and violence, traditional ethics—such as "benevolent father, filial son" and blood vengeance—prove inadequate in meeting the demands of modernity. The film ends with the drone's surveilling gaze, symbolizing the complete dissolution of rural ethics under technocratic rule. This tension-filled realist approach strikes a delicate balance between entertainment and intellectual depth.

The ending passage constructs a field of ultimate suspension of ethical judgment through three layers of narration embedding. This nested structure is presented in images, sounds, and metaphors, placing us in a gray zone of moral ambiguity, where we can't form a clear ethical judgment and are forced to face the double failure of judicial procedures and civil justice. The Narratology Theory (Genette 1980, 228) has well interpreted the audio-visual language and metaphors at the end of the film, explaining how the narration structure deconstructs the certainty of traditional ethical judgments through the delay of verdicts, diffusion of responsibilities, and systematic questioning.



Figure 7.2.7



Figure 7.2.8



Figure 7.2.9

From the visual perspective, the film's ending is characterized by the physical mutilation of the three main characters. Dong's arrest is framed from an upward angle to portray him as a clown: his smudged body, broken glasses, and the posture as he leans up to the sky and wails suggest the absurdity of his violent behavior, and the composition of the upward angle reinforces his sense of fatalism as he is crushed by the power (Figure 7.2.7). Song and Wang's injuries are also symbolic: Song's broken neck and cast (Figure 7.2.8) echo the

moral dilemma of being suspected by the villagers as a criminal, while Wang's broken bones (Figure 7.2.9) are a metaphor for the cost of his survival as a "marginalized person" in the vernacular society. This juxtaposition of physical disabilities dissolves the traditional narration dichotomy of "Good deeds bring good rewards, while evil deeds lead to evil consequences", so that we are unable to judge the moral attributes of the characters by their appearance.

The sound design further reinforces the suspension of ethical judgment. Dong's rapid breathing and cries are drowned out by the police sirens, implying the futility of his violent behavior; Song's complaints seem powerless in the truck's roar, but reveal his gratitude for surviving; and Wang's promise bursts into life in the sound of the wheels colliding with the ground. This sounds like mixing and confrontation are essentially a deconstruction of "moral discourse" - when their ethical demands are covered by the ambient noise, we can't form a clear value judgment through the auditory information.

The lingering mountain shots not only suggest that the truth of the murder has been forever buried with Dong's death but also symbolize the judicial system's impotence in intervening in rural ethics. The dialect folk song Ballad of the Chase (Zhui Xiong Yao 追凶谣) in the closing credits anchors the narration to the specific time and space of the southwestern borderlands through its strong regional symbolism. Yet, the ambiguous lyrics—"Chasing the killer to the ends of the earth, justice is still on its way"—further blur ethical boundaries. Meanwhile, the superimposition of the cast roll over documentary-style footage creates a mockumentary effect, juxtaposing fictional narration with real-world violence and undermining the audience's trust in the story's authenticity.

The three-layer nested structure directly leads to the delay of ethical judgment. Their mutilated body in the visual layer, the disembodied moral claims in the sound layer, and the unfulfilled judgment in the metaphorical layer together form an open-ended narration arena. We cannot draw a clear moral conclusion for it: although Dong is a killer, his failure stems from the absurdity of instrumental rationality; although Song is a victim, he loses his moral superiority due to the violent behavior in pursuing the killer (e.g. robbing Wang's mother's property to pay for the victim's family); although Wang is a thief, he gains some "humanity salvation" by keeping his promises and daring to commit crimes. This ambiguity in their moral attributes compels us to give up their expectations that "Good deeds bring good rewards, while evil deeds lead to evil consequences", and to think instead about the complexity of violence and justice.

The narration structure apportions the crime to each character through the interweaving of character relationships. Dong's murder stems from his material commitment to his wife, and his motive for violence is justified; Song's pursuit of the murderer, although motivated by self-incrimination, transgresses the boundaries of the lynch mob; and Wang stolen the motorbike, although compelled by the need to survive, indirectly triggers more and more murders. This "everybody is guilty" narration strategy makes it impossible for us to place the blame on any

single character, and instead we are obliged to admit that violence and crime are the structural products of the vernacular society in the process of urbanization.

Meanwhile, the final passage reveals the dual dilemmas of judicial process and civil justice through narration nesting. Dong's death is not the result of a judicial trial, but an accidental product of violent conflict; Song's moral dilemma is aggravated by the villagers' skepticism even though it arises from a judicial investigation; and Wang's pledge is fragile by his physical disability even though he tries to re-establish moral order. This failure of justice and civil justice is essentially a critique of the power structure in civilization: when violence becomes the only solution to problems, ethical judgments are bound to fall into nothingness.

The film employs a three-layered narration structure to subvert the heroic glorification of violence. Dong's death scene is steeped in irony: his defiant cry to the heavens is abruptly cut short by police suppression, while the shattering of his glasses symbolizes the collapse of his delusion of "seeing the truth". This deliberate deheroization forces viewers to confront the absurdity of violent acts, rather than romanticizing them as a means of "resisting oppression".

The dialect folk song over the closing credits, juxtaposed with aerial shots of Yunnan's landscapes, creates an ethical tension through regional symbolism. The lyrics' reference to "chasing the killer" operates on dual levels - literally addressing the film's murder case, while metaphorically representing urban modernity's erosion of rural ethics. The serene mountain vistas stand in stark contrast to the characters' fractured lives, suggesting a fundamental conflict between natural order and human violence. This intertextuality of symbols elevates the film's ethical critique beyond a singular crime, pointing instead to broader societal transformation.

The superimposition of end credits over documentary-style footage, achieved through mockumentary aesthetics, deliberately blurs the line between fictional narration and real-world violence. This technique suggests the murder case is not an isolated incident, but rather a microcosm of social upheaval in China's southwestern frontier. As viewers grapple with this dissolution of narration boundaries, the resulting suspension of ethical judgment acquires profound sociopolitical significance.

The three-tiered narration structure in "Cock and Bull" achieves a profound suspension of ethical judgment through the interplay of visual imagery, sound design, and metaphorical layering. This framework not only traps viewers in an ethical quagmire of delayed judgment, diffused responsibility, and systemic skepticism, but also exposes the disintegration of rural ethics in modernization through its deheroization of violence, the ethical tensions embedded in regional symbolism, and the mockumentary-style reflection of reality. When both judicial procedures and folk justice fail, the film's open-ended narration compels audiences to confront the complexities of violence and justice. This tension-filled storytelling enables the film to transcend genre conventions and deliver incisive social critique.

7.2.2 Narrated Realities: The Construction of “Facts” through Narrations

The film “Cock and Bull” constructs a tense network of meanings through the semiotic repetition of key props (Barthes 1977, 89), a narration strategy that creates a profound irony with the enduring notion of “investigation of things to extend knowledge”. Within the prevailing epistemological framework, “investigation of things” means to acquire true knowledge by observing and studying objective phenomena (Tu 1985, 72). However, the film shows how the objectivity of things is distorted and reconfigured by human subjectivity in contemporary vernacular society. This divergence in the perception of the material world ultimately leads to radically heterogeneous understandings of “truth” among the characters.



Figure 7.2.10

In the film “Cock and Bull”, the white suit jacket (Figure 7.2.10), as a core prop, functions like a hidden thread running through the entire narration. Its symbolic meaning undergoes fundamental changes with the shifts in narration perspectives. These transformations not only profoundly reveal the complex inner worlds and destinies of different characters but also reflect, at a deeper level, the intricate dilemmas of justice and ethics in contemporary society.

When Wang first discovers this white suit jacket, it is merely an unexpected acquisition. After stealing the motorcycle, the jacket accidentally becomes his "spoils of war". Here, the director skillfully employs shallow depth-of-field close-ups (Brown 2012, 145). Through this technique, the white fabric of the jacket stands out prominently in the frame, its pristine whiteness forming a stark and vivid contrast with Wang's dirty, grimy appearance. This visual juxtaposition is not merely about color and form but carries symbolic implications. It seems to foreshadow that this seemingly ordinary jacket will act like a boulder thrown into a calm lake, disrupting Wang Youquan's ostensibly peaceful life.

Later, Wang privately sells the jacket as evidence to Song, profiting financially from the transaction. On the surface, this appears to be a self-interested choice. Yet, at the film's

conclusion, he mentions the jacket again, claiming that his silence about it—an act of honesty—is a fine tradition inherited from his father. Superficially, this contradictory behavior seems clumsy, but deeper analysis reveals that he has reinterpreted it within the framework of the typical virtue of integrity (*Cheng*). In the prevailing ethical system, integrity is a crucial moral principle representing sincerity and trustworthiness. Though Wang initially acted improperly toward the jacket, he ultimately chooses to adhere to his inner understanding of integrity, attempting to practice this enduring ideal through concrete actions. However, such adherence appears fragile and powerless in the face of complex social realities, reflecting the predicament of inherited moral codes in modern society.

When the perspective shifts to Dong's narration segment, the same white suit jacket carries entirely different meanings. The photo and personal information hidden in its inner pocket act like a key, not only revealing his true identity but also hinting at his failure as a professional hitman. Here, the director uses jump cuts (Reisz 1968, 88) to portray Dong's panic upon realizing the jacket is missing. The shots rapidly switch, with close-ups capturing the instant he remembers the jacket on the motorcycle seat—his expression shifting abruptly from joy to extreme sorrow and terror. Subsequently, in a long shot, he runs frantically, trying to chase the stolen motorcycle while curses and shouts fill the space. These detailed depictions successfully construct an emotional climax (Smith 1995, 156). At this moment, Dong is overwhelmed by panic, regret, and other complex emotions. He knows full well that losing the jacket may expose his identity and end his career as a hitman. For him, the white suit jacket is no longer just a piece of clothing but a testament to his failed life, an inescapable shackle of fate.

Song's understanding of the jacket is even more complex. After the motorcycle clue proves useless, he views the jacket as critical evidence to clear his name and lead him to the real killer. After purchasing it, he meticulously examines every item in the jacket like a persistent detective, searching for the slightest clue to piece together the truth. However, under the scorching sun, the jacket produces unnatural glare in the frame. This visual alienation effect (Stam 1992, 134) seems to hint at the unreliability of so-called "material evidence." Initially believing the jacket would be key to his exoneration, Song gradually realizes that the clues it provides are tangled and may even lead him deeper into confusion. Like a tempting yet treacherous puzzle, the jacket ensnares him further in his quest for truth, leaving him without clear answers.

This evidential polysemy (Ginzburg 1989, 123) profoundly reflects the persistence of Fei Xiaotong's differential mode of association (Fei 1948, 65) in contemporary society. In communal settings, the meaning of objects is defined through interpersonal networks. An item's value and significance depend not just on its material properties but also on its role within human relationships. In the film, the same white suit jacket holds entirely different meanings for Wang, Dong, and Song. For Wang, it represents "trouble"—its appearance disrupts his peaceful life, entangling him in a web of complications. For Dong, it signifies "failure"—a fatal mistake in his career as a hitman, an indelible stain. It embodies "vindication"—the hope of clearing his name and proving his innocence. This multiplicity of meanings thoroughly deconstructs the codified certainty of "poetic justice". Prescriptive morality holds that good and evil will inevitably meet their just ends, yet in the modern social context depicted in the

film, this certainty collapses. The three characters, revolving around the same jacket with different motives and actions, all end up trapped in existential crises, with no clear moral judgment rendered.

Notably, by the film's end, the jacket, which determines the fates of all three characters, remains a secret entirely unknown to the police. This deeply ironic device constitutes a sharp critique of judicial justice. In legal systems, evidence is the cornerstone for determining truth and adjudicating cases. Yet in this film, the jacket, carrying critical information, is never discovered by the authorities. This implies that the real truth may remain buried forever, and justice may never be served. Judicial justice, meant to be fair, objective, and comprehensive, fails in the world of the film, prompting viewers to reflect deeply on social and legal realities.

Through its rich and complex symbolic meanings across different narration perspectives, the white suit jacket in "Cock and Bull" lays bare the paradoxes of justice and ethics in contemporary society. It reveals the immense challenges traditional ethics face in complex social realities and the imperfections of judicial justice. The design of this core prop undoubtedly adds profound thematic depth and powerful artistic impact to the film.

The motorcycle, as another central prop in "Cock and Bull", manifests an intricate and mutable narration function, like an invisible thread deftly weaving together the film's narration segments while bearing profound symbolic and ethical connotations. Technically, the director employs the motorcycle as a "kinetic prop" (Thompson 1999, 67). It is no static background element, but through spatial movement becomes a crucial force propelling the plot. The motorcycle shot in the accidental killing scene carries particularly rich symbolism. Using a high-angle long shot (Brown 2012, 192), the frame shows the motorcycle traveling alone along winding mountain roads, its wheels churning dust that obscures the road's boundaries. This imagery transcends visual representation, metaphorically suggesting the blurring of boundaries between tradition and modernity. In traditional rural society, life was relatively enclosed and stable, with clear boundaries and order. The motorcycle's emergence represents the impact of modernity, rupturing this traditional tranquility and stability, rendering once-distinct social boundaries ambiguous, foreshadowing the impending collision between old and new concepts, ethics, and morals.

Examining narration function, the motorcycle plays pivotal roles in all three main characters' stories, its meaning transforming according to each user. For Song, the motorcycle embodies a tool of modernity. Tracking the motorcycle's traces across townships, this mobility helps him break through rural society's spatial constraints. In traditional rural society, people's spheres of activity were relatively limited, information spread slowly, and interpersonal relationships primarily revolved around villages. Pursuing this comparatively smaller target (versus his truck) grants Song a broader investigative range, enabling him to cross geographic boundaries in seeking truth. During chase sequences, the director utilizes techniques like hand-held tracking shots (Brown 2012, 82) and snap zooms (Katz 1991, 210). The hand-held shots place viewers within Song's perspective, conveying his tense urgency during pursuit; the rapid zooms intensify the motorcycle's speed and modernity, vividly portraying Song's determination to

clear his name and pursue justice. Here, the motorcycle becomes both a symbol of his quest for justice in modern society and a powerful weapon in his truth-seeking.

Yet for Dong, the motorcycle transforms into an instrument for traditional blood vengeance. His first accidental killing occurs while riding the motorcycle, captured through highly impactful cinematography. The victim's shocked, fearful expression allows audiences to viscerally experience the murder's suddenness, this direct emotional impact generating profound viewer disturbance. When the motorcycle is later stolen, the engine's roar is deliberately amplified, creating sound violence (Chion 1994, 112). This auditory treatment builds tension while suggesting the swelling violent impulses within Dong. The motif recurs when Dong steals another motorcycle to return for murder, quietly mounting the parked bike while its owner celebrates a lottery win, the magnified engine hum creating suspense about his escape. This audiovisual approach transmutes the motorcycle from mere transport into an extension of violence itself. For Dong, it becomes both a means to personal ends and an emotional outlet, its mobility enabling traditional blood vengeance while ignoring attendant ethical questions.

Most dramatically, the motorcycle ultimately delivers Dong to his death. In the climactic sequence, he rides into a police ambush. This composition deliberately echoes the opening mountain shot, but now the motorcycle loses its freedom of movement, trapped within police vehicles. A 360-degree rotating shot (Katz 1991, 225) captures this tragic moment. The motorcycle's metal shell reflects distorted light in the darkness, symbolizing how modern tools ultimately consume their users. Dong sought to wield the motorcycle for vengeance, yet his actions steered him toward destruction. This plot development profoundly reveals the inadvisability of pursuing personal ends through violence, while demonstrating modern tools' potential harm when misused.

This duality resonates with Chinese intellectual history's "ti-yong" debate (essence versus application). Within the ti-yong conceptual framework, "ti" refers to moral substance while "yong" denotes practical methodology (Tu 1985, 89). The motorcycle perfectly embodies this tension: as "yong," it's a value-neutral modern tool, inherently neither good nor evil, merely providing a means of action; but as "ti," its use always carries moral significance. When Song pursues justice astride the motorcycle, it becomes justice's instrument; when Dong commits murder, it turns violent accomplice. This contradiction peaks at the crossroads scene where their motorcycles converge, then diverge—the meticulously composed shot symbolizes modernization's moral dilemmas through their separate paths.

Thus, as the film's core prop, the motorcycle's fluid narration functions profoundly reflect contemporary rural society's ethical complexity. It can be both justice's tool and violence's accomplice - this duality epitomizes modernization's moral quandaries. Through this prop, the film reminds viewers that pursuing modern life mustn't neglect traditional ethics' value, urging balance between material mobility and moral judgment to avoid tragic outcomes.

Through narrations surrounding two core props—the suit jacket and motorcycle—the film delivers a penetrating analysis of contemporary rural ethics. Prevailing ethical systems viewed objects as stable meaning-carriers (investigating things to extend knowledge) and humans as moral practitioners (cultivating self to regulate family). Within that framework, objects bore relatively fixed symbolic meanings, and moral judgments followed established principles. But “Cock and Bull” presents a universe where objects’ meanings flow unpredictably and human moral judgments fragment. The suit jacket assumes different meanings with different owners; the motorcycle manifests good and evil through different users. This fundamental cognitive rupture constitutes the film’s core tragic tension. As modernization accelerates, inherited ethical frameworks erode—objects’ meanings destabilize, moral judgments diversify. In pursuit of material gain, people often relinquish ethical direction. Through the narration of these props, the film lays bare this social reality, provoking deep reflection on ethics and justice.

7.3 The Exposure, Obfuscation, and Irony of Moral Ethics

In its intricate nonlinear narration structure, established ethical frameworks do not emerge as stable moral coordinates but instead undergo a triple process of development, obscuration, and irony amid shifting perspectives and multiple motivations. The film centers on a seemingly straightforward homicide, yet in its telling, it continuously widens the moral distance between characters, exposing the tensions within rural society’s interpersonal ethics rooted in the differential mode of association.

Dong’s extreme protectiveness toward his family, in his account, could be interpreted as an extension of kinship ethics, yet it simultaneously reveals how such relational obligations undergo violent transformation in contemporary contexts. Meanwhile, Song La’er—positioned at society’s bottom—is mistaken for the killer by his village and collectively ostracized, forcing him onto a quest to prove his innocence. His actions become a tangled reflection of clan ethics, public trust, and individual survival.

These contradictions do not resolve into clear moral judgments. Instead, they are perpetually subjected to narration deferral and perspectival fragmentation, ultimately destabilizing the prevailing tenet that “the virtuous man is cautious in solitude” (慎独). In the nonlinear narration, each character’s solitary behavior must be indirectly reconstructed through others’ perspectives, and their attempts to demonstrate moral consistency invariably fail. This ethical instability is not clarified as the plot progresses; rather, it remains suspended within the film’s tension-filled structure.

More ironically, the film packages this ethical crisis in a seemingly lighthearted comedic tone through regional dialects, absurd performances, and the caricaturization of characters. The boundaries between sin and virtue, justice and absurdity are blurred, forming an ethical aesthetic akin to “grief without despair”. This can also be seen as a contemporary expression and distortion of inherited cultural emphases on balance and human warmth.

In the narration context of the film, Fei Xiaotong's sociological concept of "differential mode of association" (Fei 1948, 25) is interpreted with great tension. Through the behavioral logic of these two characters, Dong and Song, the film shows the complex variants of relational ethics in contemporary vernacular society.

The ethical predicament faced by Dong's character reveals the increasingly complex and contradictory landscape of survival in contemporary China. Through the film's flashback sequences, we glimpse fragments of Dong's past. He repeatedly recounts his tragic experiences of being cheated by unscrupulous merchants. Once, he robbed a jewelry store with high hopes of changing his fate and achieving prosperity, only to discover that most of the stolen gold was counterfeit—a crushing blow that laid bare both his greed and desperation. His attempt to buy property plunged him even deeper into despair; seduced by false advertising, he believed he had secured a stable home, only to find the apartment uninhabitable, his life savings vanishing overnight. These relentless setbacks, like heavy shackles, left him gasping for breath. Under such immense pressure, he reluctantly turned to crime, seeking to maintain the semblance of stability he so desperately craved. These experiences expose the harsh choices made by those struggling at society's margins when confronted with life's cruelty, reflecting the systemic injustices faced by the underclass in their pursuit of a basic livelihood.

The film's climactic farewell scene is laden with symbolic weight. Dong's repeated plea to his wife to "change the apartment" intercuts with his fatal shooting, creating a powerful intertext. This technique of affective grafting distorts the conventional duty of "providing for one's family" into a criminal motive. In mainstream ethics, "providing for the family" is a widely recognized obligation. Yet for Dong, this responsibility becomes grotesquely twisted—he turns to crime in the name of securing a better life for his wife and achieving his warped vision of "stability". This moral degradation is not merely personal failure but the inevitable outcome of societal pressures and survival instincts (Smith 2017, 112).



Figure 7.3.1

Significantly, Dong's wife (Figure 7.3.1)—a nightclub hostess—adds a razor-edged class dimension to this "crime-for-family" narration. In today's rapidly urbanizing China, "housing anxiety" has emerged as a new ethical crucible. As Zhou Feizhou observes, urbanization has

turned housing into an existential crisis for many families. Dong, as a representative of the underclass, yearns for a stable home but finds it perpetually out of reach. This desperate longing drives him to extreme measures, using crime to pursue his illusory dream of "home". The plot lays bare the vast inequities in access to basic needs like housing during urbanization, delivering a scathing indictment of the underclass's plight (Zhou 2012, 78).

Dong's dilemma transcends individual tragedy, it mirrors China's societal fractures of that time. His story lays bare the impossible choices forced upon the marginalized and the systemic failures exacerbated by urban class stratification. Through this character, the film forces audiences to confront the brutal complexities of our reality and to reckon with how society might address these injustices.

Compared to Dong, Song's ethical predicament bears more distinct characteristics of malformed urbanization, profoundly reflecting the collision between rural societal ethics and modern legal concepts. In the police station scene, the repeated alternation between the national emblem on the police cap and Song's facial expressions creates a striking "visual counterpoint" (Bordwell 1985, 213). The national emblem, as a symbol of state power and modern rule of law, appears solemn and dignified; whereas Song's complex facial expressions betray his inner turmoil and conflict. When the police demand his cooperation, his body language reveals palpable contradiction as Figure 7.3.2 shows. His forward-leaning torso seems to indicate willingness to comply, yet his intertwined fingers unconsciously expose deeply ingrained clan consciousness. In rural society, clan mentality is deeply rooted—collective honor and interests often take precedence. This subtle manifestation of body politics (Foucault 1977, 152) vividly illustrates what Fei Xiaotong termed the structural conflict between rural society's "ritual governance"(Fei 1948, 43) and modern legal concepts.



Figure 7.3.2

This conflict becomes particularly evident in Song's pursuit of the killer. While ostensibly cooperating with the police investigation, he ultimately withholds the white jacket—a narratively pivotal moment marking the limited concession of relational ethics before modern judiciary. The prevalent ethic of "concealing misconduct among kin" (qinqin xiangyin)

emphasizes familial protection based on blood ties and emotional bonds. Yet modern legal systems prioritize evidentiary integrity and objectivity. Song's actions epitomize his vacillation between these two value systems: though partially adhering to legal requirements, his inherent distrust of the judiciary, born from an entrenched rural mindset, remains unresolved.

This character's dilemma serves as a microcosm of transitional China. As legal reforms progress, reconciling traditional rural ethics with modern jurisprudence remains an urgent societal challenge—one that lays bare the friction between centuries-old kinship logic and contemporary institutional demands.

This film vividly portrays the traditional moral concept of "vigilance in solitude"¹³⁵ (*Shendu*) through the behaviors and psychological journeys of its characters. *Shendu* emphasizes maintaining moral integrity when unsupervised, honestly confronting oneself, and critically examining one's actions. The three protagonists—Song, Wang, and Dong—each embody distinct facets of this principle through their unique life trajectories.

After being named a suspect, Song finds himself in dire straits. Surrounded by suspicious glances, his life and work crumble, leaving him isolated and unsupervised. Yet he refuses to surrender or flee, instead embarking alone on his quest for justice. He could have easily given up, choosing self-preservation like most would, but his relentless pursuit of truth, to clear his name, demonstrates his moral fortitude. Unswayed by external pressures or temptations, he shoulders the burden of finding the real killer without compromising his principles. This mirrors *Shendu*'s essence: remaining steadfast when unobserved. As *the Doctrine of the Mean* states: The most subtle aspects of virtue are revealed in solitude; thus the noble person is vigilant when alone (Zhu 2008, 1628). Song's actions epitomize this—upholding morality even in unseen adversity.

After stealing the motorcycle, Wang grapples with guilt. Unobserved, he could have escaped accountability, yet when confronted by Song, he confesses truthfully. This seemingly simple act carries profound ethical weight. In solitude, Wang confronts his misdeed—neither blinded by greed nor evading responsibility, but courageously facing his fault. Such self-honesty is central to *Shendu*. His willingness to amend errors is rare; where many might slacken moral standards when unwatched, Wang's integrity shines. His behavior echoes Wang Yangming's philosophy: Through earnest self-cultivation, one daily perceives the subtleties of innate moral principles (Wang 2004, 123). Though not directly referencing Wang, this underscores the importance of self-scrutiny in solitude.

As a hitman, Dong frequently operates alone. Murder violates ethics and law, yet before killing, his solitary reflections reveal inner conflict after mistakenly killing Cat, his pity and regret hint

¹³⁵ *Shendu* (慎独), or "vigilance in solitude", is a key Confucian concept denoting moral self-cultivation through maintaining ethical vigilance and integrity even in complete privacy. It is classically defined in *Zhongyong* (The Doctrine of the Mean), Ch. 1: "故君子慎其独也" ("Therefore, the noble person is cautious when he is alone"). For an authoritative translation, see James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1893), 124.

at residual humanity. In solitude, his moral conscience clashes violently with his crimes—he recognizes their depravity but persists for money or duty. This struggle reflects Shendu's introspective dimension. Though he ultimately commits evil, his unresolved guilt proves his conscience isn't wholly extinguished. Dong's character demonstrates how even criminals may grapple with morality in solitude, testifying to Shendu's power to pierce darkness and summon ethical reckoning. Through Song's resolve, Wang's honesty, and Dong's turmoil, this film illuminates Shendu's multifaceted significance in contemporary society. It reminds us that regardless of circumstance or surveillance, we must uphold moral boundaries, confront ourselves truthfully, and relentlessly examine our actions.

The actions of the three protagonists—Song, Wang, and Dong—are steeped in absurdity, yet beneath the surface lies profound ethical conflict. Each character's journey exposes the grotesque contradictions of morality in a society under strain. As a mechanic wrongly accused of murder, Song embarks on a farcical quest to clear his name. His methods border on the ridiculous: disguised as a pig trader, he infiltrates a village only to be mistaken for a human trafficker and tied up; he tracks a motorcycle, yet his reckless tactic of scattering nails causes chaos. But this absurdity masks a deeper moral stubbornness. His refusal to passively accept injustice, even defying the police, reveals an unyielding commitment to his own innocence. The contrast between his comical actions and his solemn principles satirizes the plight of the marginalized: Song's pursuit of "justice" becomes both laughable and heroic, caught between survival instincts and societal pressure.

Wang's absurdity stems from the clash between his petty theft and sudden conscience. After stealing a motorcycle, he unwittingly becomes entangled in murder. When pursued by Song, he could have fled, yet he voluntarily surrenders critical evidence and confesses. This shift from "delinquent" to "penitent" reflects moral introspection, but his redemption is incomplete. His minor sin inadvertently drives the plot forward, embodying the struggle of the underclass: torn between material desperation and lingering ethics.

Dong, the killer, epitomizes tragicomic absurdity. Swindled in a property scam, he turns to crime for money—yet bungles every step: he accidentally kills the wrong man, loses key evidence, and even becomes an object of ridicule. This "five-star killer" (a mocking title) is a walking contradiction, his incompetence at odds with his vicious profession. But his absurdity is not mere buffoonery; it's rooted in moral conflict. Pangs of remorse precede his crimes, and his dying words curse "deceitful merchants". This duality—a murderer clinging to shreds of humanity—serves as a brutal irony: even the damned retain traces of conscience.

The film weaponizes absurdity to dissect ethical fractures in modern China. Song's futile integrity, Wang's partial atonement, and Dong's bungled evil collectively portray a world where morality is destabilized—yet never entirely extinguished.

It intensifies its ethical satire through the closed-off world of a remote Yunnan town. This setting—isolated and backward—serves not merely as backdrop but as a potent symbol of psychological repression and human alienation. Spaces like Song's auto repair shop and Dong's

rented hideout become physical manifestations of inner turmoil, where moral dilemmas are magnified under spatial constraints. In these confined environments, Song's *garage* becomes an arena for his solitary defiance. As police suspicions and villagers' misjudgments press inward, his stubborn pursuit of justice appears tragically heightened by the shop's physical limitations. Dong's rented room lays bare his fractured psyche through obsessive details—repeatedly polishing his dagger, muttering to himself, as he plans murders. The walls seem to absorb his moral contradictions. This spatial-psychological interplay exposes how isolation accelerates dehumanization: without societal oversight, darkness festers more freely.

The film sharpens its irony through spatial contrasts: The town's narrow alleys embody systemic oppression, physically constricting characters' movements as societal forces constrain their lives. Expansive natural landscapes tease an unattainable freedom—Song's chase sequences through mountains emphasize his inability to break the town's hold, while Dong's attempted escape circles back to confinement. This spatial paradox mirrors the underclass's existential trap: their yearning for liberation remains perpetually outmatched by reality's chains.

It employs a fragmented narration structure, dividing the story into five chapters titled with Yunnan dialect epithets¹³⁶: "Fool," "Little Rascal," "Country Thief," "Chaotic Nonsense," and "Termite Mushroom". This approach not only subverts the monotony of linear storytelling but, through multi-perspective shifts, exposes each character's ethical dilemmas and choices. The chapter "Country Thief" focalizes Dong's perspective, revealing him as an absurd anti-hitman: his extreme nearsightedness leads to mistakenly killing Cat when he can't identify his target; his gold store robbery fails because the loot turns out to be fake; even mid-crime, he curses "deceitful merchants". This narration strategy deconstructs the cold-blooded killer archetype of crime films, reducing him to a desperate victim of circumstance. Yet this deconstruction doesn't soften the film's ethical critique—Dong's tragic demise instead sharpens the satire of social injustice: even the most ridiculous killer is ultimately society's casualty. The ending further deepens this ethical irony through narration construction. Surrounded by police, Dong's frantic gesticulations end abruptly with a headshot. While satisfying genre expectations, his death exposes the powerlessness of the underclass within systemic structures. This isn't heroic sacrifice but absurdist inevitability. The film thus dismantles the binary of "good vs evil", presenting instead marginalized figures torn between survival and morality.

The film's comedic packaging serves not merely as entertainment, but through exaggerated absurdity, provokes profound reflection on ethical dilemmas. By tracing the fates of three

¹³⁶ “憨包” Refers to fools and idiots, and is a term of abuse with a pejorative coloring, commonly found in Guizhou, Sichuan, Yunnan and other southwestern dialects.

“小烂屎” It is a very insulting word in the Yunnan dialect, which contains a strong pejorative connotation.

“土贼” In Yunnan and northwestern China, the term is used to describe people who have not seen the world, behave in a rustic manner, or are self-righteous. Its meaning can be positive, negative or neutral depending on the context.

“乱屁麻麻” It describes a scene or thing that is chaotic and clueless, and can also refer to a noisy and lively environment.

“鸡枞” This word refers to the wild edible fungus unique to Yunnan, which is known as the “King of Mushrooms” because of its plump flesh and delicious flavor. In the dialect, the word is often used as an emotion expression, equivalent to “disdain” or “dissatisfaction” in Mandarin.

marginalized characters—Song, Wang, and Dong—the film exposes the survival crises and moral alienation of the underclass in modern society. Song's stubborn perseverance and isolation mirror the powerlessness of the disadvantaged confronting injustice; Wang's theft and subsequent repentance reveal how survival pressures erode moral boundaries; Dong's absurdity and tragic end symbolize how social inequity catalyzes human alienation. Their stories constitute both individual tragedies and collective social metaphors. The comedic veneer dissolves the heaviness typical of ethical critique, yet through recurring absurdity, intensifies its societal indictment. Employing black humor, the film weaves ethical conflicts and human dilemmas into ridiculous scenarios, achieving ethical irony beneath laughter. Three dimensions reinforce this satire: Absurd Actions (characters' irrational yet contextually logical behaviors), Spatial Symbolism (the town's physical constraints mirroring social oppression), and Narration Deconstruction (fragmented storytelling subverting moral binaries). Ultimately, this irony challenges conventional ethics while holding up a fractured mirror to urbanization, where survival instincts and moral imperatives wage perpetual war in the shadows of progress.

7.4 The Local Reconstruction of Rashomon's Structure

In “Cock and Bull”, Cao Baoping does not merely replicate the classic "multi-perspective plus unknowable truth" structure of Kurosawa's “Rashomon”. Rather, he deeply embeds this nonlinear narration framework into the ethical fabric and cultural logic of China's rural society, achieving a localized reconstruction of the "Rashomon-style" structure. This adaptation goes beyond formal imitation—it constitutes a comprehensive rewriting at the levels of narration philosophy, cultural context, and audiovisual language. While Kurosawa's film grounds its fatalistic skepticism about "the unattainability of truth" in Japanese Buddhism's notions of impermanence and nihilism, “Cock and Bull” uses China's social reality as its canvas. It transforms multiperspectival fragmentation into a metaphorical expression of the ethical dilemmas, identity anxieties, and survival pragmatism of the underclass. This shift not only highlights the philosophical differences between Chinese and Japanese cultures regarding "truth", "responsibility", and "human nature" but also reveals how the "Rashomon structure" mutates within a local context.

In Kurosawa's “Rashomon”, the rain-drenched ruins of the Rashomon gate construct a space brimming with metaphysical anxiety, profoundly interrogating the unknowability of truth (Richie 1987, 56). This thematic concern undergoes radical Sinicization in Cao Baoping's “Cock and Bull”. The film transposes Japanese philosophical speculation into the uniquely vernacular milieu¹³⁷ of rural Yunnan, where handheld cinematography and regional dialects viscerally capture villagers' conflicting subjective interpretations of the same homicide—constituting nothing less than an ethnographic performance of plebeian epistemology. This spatial and stylistic transformation signals a paradigm shift from philosophical contemplation to pragmatic skepticism (Fei 1948, 89).

¹³⁷ A kind of scroll designed to show the local cultural and life.

The ragged Rashomon gate in the rain becomes a symbolic space, which not only carries the narration but also maps out the anxiety and confusion within the characters. In “Cock and Bull”, this space is replaced with the streets and alleys in rural Yunnan, which is filled with a strong dialect and life atmosphere. Through hand-held photography, the film captures the villagers' different perceptions and narrations about the murder, vividly displaying urban epistemology. This exhibition reflects the villagers' diverse understandings of the truth, it also reveals their pragmatic attitudes in confronting complex social realities (Huang 2015, 112). For example, when Song is suspected to be the murderer, different villagers give very contrasting accounts. Some villagers, based on Song's usual behavior, believe that he cannot do such a thing, while others flatly assert that Song is the murderer because he quarrels with the victim. These subjective assumptions are based on a lack of conclusive evidence, however, they also reflect the cognitive limitations and pragmatic tendencies of the villagers when faced with complex events. They preferred believing in the "truth" that suited their interests or prejudices rather than pursuing objective facts.

Dong's two monologue scenes are profoundly emblematic. Different from the poetic indictment delivered through the medium in “Rashomon” by the samurai's ghost, Dong's monologues employ a documentary-style long-take technique (Nichols 2010, 78). Before mistakenly killing Cat, he adopts the tone of a tragic antihero, lamenting how his robbery of a jewelry store yielded no profit because the owner sold counterfeit goods, leaving him with nothing but years of wasted imprisonment. In his final moments before being shot dead, he again rails against the unscrupulous merchants who left him cornered with no way out. These fourth-wall-breaking moments (Bennett 1997, 134) transform Kurosawa's existential questioning into concrete social critique (Wang 2018, 45). Dong's monologues do more than expose his personal tragic fate—they reflect the desperation and struggles of those at society's bottom when confronting systemic injustice. His grievances are not merely personal lamentations but constitute a broader indictment and reflection on the social environment itself.

Unlike “Rashomon”, which explores the unknowability of truth through metaphysical anxiety, “Cock and Bull” shifts focus toward a pragmatic skepticism in its interrogation of truth. In the film, the villagers' conflicting accounts of the homicide stem not from philosophical contemplation but from their lived experiences and vested interests. This pragmatic doubt permeates not only their attitudes toward truth but also the film's overarching narration. For instance, during the manhunt, Song, Wang, and Dong each become entangled in the case due to their personal motives—whether self-interest, emotional entanglements, or survival pressures. Their actions are never driven by a pursuit of truth but by pragmatic calculations, propelling the plot while exposing the complexity and contradictions of human nature within a fraught social reality. Through this localized adaptation of Rashomon's "unknowable truth" framework, the film transposes Japanese philosophical inquiry into the gritty vernacular of rural Yunnan. Handheld camerawork and regional dialects vividly stage the villagers' subjective, self-serving interpretations of the crime, performing what might be termed a street-level epistemology. Meanwhile, Dong's monologue scenes repurpose Kurosawa's existential musings into concrete social critique, laying bare the struggles of those marginalized by systemic inequity. This shift from metaphysical speculation to pragmatic skepticism reflects

not only the film's incisive social commentary but also the innovative ways Chinese cinema reconfigures global narrations to local contexts.

The film's transformation of the "Rashomon" multi-perspective narration is reflected in three dimensions: In the film "Cock and Bull", the concept of Jianghu Brotherhood (江湖义气) assumes a unique narration function, profoundly driving plot development and enriching character portrayals. A concentrated manifestation of this narration function appears in the scene where Song gathers his friends to help apprehend the murderer in the village. With just one phone call, dozens of workers at the manganese mine quickly assemble and immediately drive to the scene to provide support. The camera follows this collective team's leader as they traverse the entire work site. The men wear hard hats and carry their work tools, which have now transformed into weapons for upholding justice. Filled with righteous fervor, they move in unison with swift, decisive actions, assembling without hesitation solely to help their sworn fellow Song. On their way to the scene, their convoy kicks up billowing dust on the roads, engulfing the police car that follows behind. This swirling dust is not merely a visual obstruction but symbolizes the subtle conflict between brotherhood justice and judicial justice, hinting at the powerful force and influence of brotherhood loyalty in folk society, while also revealing people's distrust—even despair—toward judicial procedures under certain circumstances.

Although the entire manhunt operation ultimately ends in failure, the drinking session where Song and his Brothers drown their sorrows holds extraordinary significance. On one hand, he uses this occasion to thank them for their staunch support; on the other hand, it serves to establish a broader connection in an attempt to capture the murderer. This scene presents the camaraderie and Jinghu Brotherhood between men in a highly ritualistic manner through the quintessentially Chinese Banquet Culture¹³⁸. In the clamorous atmosphere of drinking games and rowdy toasts, the overwhelming support Song receives is profoundly moving. This non-verbal code of interpersonal relationships constitutes a contemporary variation of what is described as an "acquaintance society" (Fei 1948, 33), where people are closely connected through emotions and brotherhood loyalty—forming a stark contrast with the completely stranger-based witness relationships in "Rashomon". The two differ significantly in emotional bonds, behavioral motivations, narration direction, and thematic expression.

In terms of emotional bonds, Song and his fellows in "Cock and Bull" share deep emotional connections. They live in the same "acquaintance society", familiar with and trusting one another. A single phone call from Song prompts his fellows to immediately set aside their work, take up their tools as weapons, and drive to his aid. This resolute action stems from their long-accumulated friendship, vividly embodying Jianghu brotherhood. In contrast, the witnesses in "Rashomon" are complete strangers who merely happen to cross paths in the specific time and space of the crime, lacking any emotional foundation and possibly never having met before

¹³⁸ 酒桌文化. It refers to a complex set of social norms, behavioral patterns, and values that have developed around drinking activities in the unique social context of China. It is both an important medium of interpersonal interaction and a reflection of the deeper features of traditional culture, power structures, and social relations.

the incident. Regarding behavioral motivations, the fellows in “Cock and Bull” help Song primarily out of brotherly affection and brotherhood justice. Their actions involve very little calculation of personal gain; they simply wish to lend a hand to a friend, uphold justice, and help Song find justice. This motivation is pure and direct, reflecting mutual support within an acquaintance society. By comparison, the witnesses in “Rashomon” have complex and selfish motivations. Each of them fabricates testimony in court for their interests, and reputation, or evade responsibility, their behavior entirely driven by personal gain. In narration direction, the Jianghu brotherhood in “Cock and Bull” intensifies the plot's drama and adds dimensionality to character portrayals. The workers' righteous actions propel the manhunt forward, and though it ultimately fails, the process reveals character traits and emotional worlds, filling the story with passion and warmth. Conversely, the conflicting testimonies of strangers in “Rashomon” construct a narration space brimming with suspense and uncertainty. Viewers struggle to discern truth amid contradictory accounts, rendering the case's truth increasingly elusive and prompting profound reflection on human complexity. Thematically, “Cock and Bull” use Jianghu brotherhood to convey genuine emotions and the virtue of mutual support in adversity, while also exploring the conflict between judicial justice and folk morality. “Rashomon”, through its stranger-witness relationships, exposes humanity's selfishness, hypocrisy, and unreliability, critiquing the ugly human tendency to prioritize self-interest over responsibility and prompting reflection on human nature.

The Jianghu (江湖) brotherhood in “Cock and Bull” and the completely stranger-based witness relationships in *Rashomon* exhibit fundamentally different characteristics across multiple dimensions. These differences not only enrich cinematic narration techniques but also provide us with distinct perspectives for examining human nature, society, and justice.

In the study of cinematic narration structures, “Rashomon” is renowned for its rigorous temporal symmetry (Richie 1987, 102), constructing a precise and profound narration space for audiences. In stark contrast, “Cock and Bull” deliberately breaks from this tradition, forging its own distinctive narration path. “Rashomon” strictly adheres to temporal symmetry, with each character's perspective segment exhibiting remarkable balance and correlation in duration. This meticulous structural design allows different viewpoints to complement and corroborate one another, collectively piecing together the full picture of the crime while prompting deep reflection on truth and human nature. “Cock and Bull”, however, subverts this convention—the segments from Wang, Dong, and Song's perspectives are neither equal in length nor temporally correlated. This intentional asymmetrical narration (Bordwell 2002, 156) is no directorial accident but a deliberate creative choice. Beyond the three main perspectives, the film includes two additional segments shot from an objective viewpoint, further heightening its structural imbalance and diverging radically from “Rashomon”'s symmetrical framework. Where “Rashomon”'s interlocking testimonies gradually unveil truth through contradiction and reconciliation, its asymmetrical approach cultivates an atmosphere of ambiguity, keeping us perpetually suspended between pursuit and perplexity.

This narration imbalance mirrors the reality of differential memory (Fei 1948, 117) in rural China—a concept Fei Xiaotong proposed to describe how testimonial weight is inherently

unequal among individuals of differing social status. In its rural setting, this phenomenon is laid bare: Wang, an ordinary rural youth, speaks from personal hardship and emotional need; Dong, a ruthless hitman, filters events through self-interest and paranoia; Song, a locally influential figure, is constrained by reputation and social ties. Their divergent accounts, magnified by the film's asymmetrical structure, resist easy synthesis into objective truth. Through its unbalanced narration and portrayal of differential memory, the film not only enriches its narration layers but also critiques rural China's sociopolitical fabric. It reveals how truth, entangled in complex power dynamics and conflicting interests, becomes distorted and obscured. The innovative storytelling of “Cock and Bull” opens a new window into China's rural society and the contradictions of human nature.

Rashomon has become a classic for its profound themes and narration structure. Its redemptive ending—where the priest adopts the abandoned infant—shines like a sliver of light in the darkness, offering the audience solace about humanity and hope. In stark contrast, “Cock and Bull” conclude with a heavy sense of absurdity and harsh reality. In the film's final moments, Dong is gunned down under police siege outside his own home. He collapses under his wife's gaze—a scene of immense impact. Cao employs an open framing: Dong's corpse lies at the center of the frame, and as the camera slowly pulls back, the surrounding officers stand frozen in an irregular circle around him. In the dark of night, police lights flash with glaring red, like a judgment from fate; the dim streetlamps cast a desolate glow, heightening the oppressive atmosphere. This is no mere depiction of an event but a spatial allegory. It refuses to offer the audience a clear moral resolution—there is no poetic justice or karmic retribution in the traditional sense.

Amid China's rapidly advancing market economy, social values have grown pluralistic and complex. Human relationships, the balance between morality and self-interest, face unprecedented challenges. Dong's death is not just the end of one man's fate; it symbolizes how, in the tide of modernization, some lose themselves in the pursuit of profit, spiraling into irreversible ruin. This value rift is magnified infinitely in the film's open composition, leaving viewers in deep contemplation long after the credits roll. As for Song and Wang, they ride back to the village together in a truck. Legally, both should face consequences—Wang for theft, and Song for taking the law into his own hands. Yet the film's ending implies they evade punishment. This narration choice is no accident; the creators harbor sympathy for them. Song, a simple auto mechanic, endures hardship to clear his name and protect his family's honor. Wang, though flawed, shows kindness and struggles with his desperation. The filmmakers' partiality allows them to slip the noose of strict legal accountability—a subtle but pointed irony toward the judicial system. It reveals how real-world justice is neither absolute nor flawless, susceptible to influences like emotion and public opinion. This irony does not reject the law outright but holds up a mirror to reality, provoking reflection on judicial fairness and social order.

With its unconventional ending, “Cock and Bull” shatters traditional cinematic norms. Through spatial allegory and judicial irony, it lays bare the social realities of China's market-

driven transformation, presenting audiences with a complex, unflinching portrait of contemporary life.

Filmmakers from different regions and cultural backgrounds often achieve cultural exchange and integration through skillful application and innovative transformation of audiovisual language. In its process of referencing and localizing Japanese aesthetics, “Cock and Bull” demonstrates unique cultural transcoding wisdom at the audiovisual level, providing audiences with distinctive aesthetic experiences and cultural reflections.



Figure 7.4.1



Figure 7.4.2

First examining the crucial element of the environment, Kurosawa's masterpiece “Rashomon” famously employs “forest light” as the significant backdrop for its story (Richie 1987, 89). This distinctive forest lighting (Figure 7.4.1), created by dappled sunlight filtering through leaves and the stark contrasts between light and shadow on tree trunks and branches, serves multiple purposes. On one hand, it creates a mysterious, profound narration atmosphere full of uncertainty. Viewers feel immersed in a fog-shrouded world where the truth remains elusive, with every beam of light and patch of shadow seemingly concealing secrets, greatly enhancing the story's suspense and appeal. On the other hand, this use of forest lighting gives the film a strong Japanese aesthetic quality of *yūgen* (mysterious profundity). The *yūgen* aesthetic emphasizes subtlety, obscurity, and depth, with the forest lighting perfectly embodying this artistic pursuit, allowing viewers to sense the Japanese cultural reverence for the unknown and unique aesthetic perception while watching the film. In “Cock and Bull”, however, the setting is cleverly transplanted to the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau characterized by “hard plateau light”. Unlike the soft, mysterious forest lighting in “Rashomon”, the noonday sunlight on the plateau is intense and direct, with strong exposing qualities (Figure 7.4.2). Under this lighting, subjects cast sharp shadows with clear, well-defined contrasts between light and dark. In the film, motorcycles and characters project “shadow puppets”¹³⁹-like silhouettes on dirt roads, creating a unique visual effect that becomes one of the film's highlights. This application of topographic cinematography (Bordwell 2005, 201) is not merely a simple change of setting, but rather a localized transformation of the Japanese *yūgen* aesthetic. The plateau's rough textures—cracked earth, rugged mountain paths,

¹³⁹ Piyongxi (皮影戏), or shadow puppetry, is a traditional Chinese folk art involving the manipulation of leather silhouettes behind a lit screen. It integrates sculpture, performance, music, and storytelling, and is recognized as significant intangible cultural heritage. For reference, see its documentation in *Meng Yuanlao's Dream Pool Essays* and its inscription on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (2011).

simple structures—interact with the intense plateau light to create an atmosphere completely different from the Japanese forest lighting. This atmosphere is full of lifelike authenticity and regional characteristics, transporting viewers from Japanese-style mystery to the unadorned ruggedness of western China, giving the film strong visual distinctiveness and cultural identity.

Beyond environmental transformation, performance style represents important cultural transcoding in audiovisual language. In “Rashomon”, Tajōmaru's highly stylized Noh theater-influenced performance carries distinct traditional Japanese cultural characteristics. As a typical Japanese theatrical form, Noh emphasizes formalized movements—actors use exaggerated body language, distinctive facial expressions, and specific vocal techniques to convey characters' emotions and personalities. However, in “Cock and Bull”'s adaptation, this Noh-style performance is not replaced by Peking Opera or any other characteristically Chinese traditional art form. Instead, Dong Xiaofeng's performance exhibits unique “folk body”¹⁴⁰ (Wang 2018, 134) characteristics: his slightly limping gait perhaps hints at life's hardships and physical exhaustion; his exaggerated arm swings and dramatic turns reveal his flamboyant, unrestrained personality. These performance details remarkably resemble the physicality of the “Bangbang Army”¹⁴¹ in southwestern China. The “Bangbang Army” refers to the unique labor group in China's southwest who make their living carrying loads on shoulder poles, having developed distinctive postures and movement patterns through long-term heavy physical labor. Dong's performance method, rooted in body anthropology (Farquhar 2002, 89), is not deliberate imitation but emerges from deep immersion in real life. It transforms the criminal character from a traditional stereotypical villain into a figure with localized credibility. From Dong's performance, audiences can see reflections of real people in life, since his joys, sorrows, and struggles, and thus more easily develop emotional resonance.

Based on the above analysis of environment and performance style, we can perceive how Dong Xiaofeng, as a negative character in the film, easily evokes audience empathy—a significant difference from “Rashomo”'s character portrayals. This distinction originates from the Chinese rural tradition of “sentimental rationality”¹⁴² (Yan 2017, 78). In rural Chinese society, equal emphasis is placed on emotional and rational considerations. When judging matters, people rely not just on legal statutes but pay greater attention to emotional factors and moral evaluations. Dong Xiaofeng shares common traits with the heroes in *Water Margin* (水浒

¹⁴⁰ Shijing shenti (市井身体) refers to the sociocultural characteristics embodied in the bodily states, behaviors, and everyday practices of common people in urban environments. This concept highlights how the “marketplace body” becomes a site where social norms, economic pressures, and urban culture are physically manifested and negotiated. For a theoretical foundation of the “urban body” in Chinese context, see Yang Nianqun, *The Revelation of the “Body”: A History of the Spatialization of Power in Modern China* (Beijing: Renmin University Press, 2020), esp. Chapter 3; for concrete manifestations in urban life, consult Li Oufan, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), particularly the analysis of daily bodily practices.

¹⁴¹ 棒棒军 It is the term given to a group of temporary porters who use bamboo sticks and ropes to make a living by physically carrying goods on the streets of Southwest China, especially Chongqing. Due to the group's activities and popularized image, the term is a distinctive cultural symbol in the region.

¹⁴² 情理论 Sentimental rationality in rural China focuses on the social factors behind the emotional state, interpersonal relationships and emotional changes in rural society, covering vernacular emotions, marital and family emotions, intergenerational emotions, and the application and challenges of sentimental rationality.

传) who were "forced to become outlaws". In *Water Margin*, many heroes were originally law-abiding commoners who ultimately took the path of rebellion due to social injustice and oppression by evil forces. Dong follows the same trajectory—after suffering various frustrations and injustices, he turns to crime. While the judicial system views him as a violent offender, his actions stem from complex emotional factors and social roots that align with traditional Chinese moral coordinates. In traditional Chinese morality, people often maintain some sympathy and understanding for those who err under life's pressures, not considering them irredeemably evil. Therefore, we can perceive the complexity and helplessness of human nature through Dong's character, thereby developing empathy.

Through its localized transformation of Japanese aesthetics at the audiovisual level, "Cock and Bull" achieves cultural transcoding and transmission. From environmental transposition to innovative performance styles, and further to its embodiment of Chinese rural "sentimental rationality", the film constructs a cinematic world rich in regional characteristics and cultural connotations through unique audiovisual language. This allows us to appreciate not just the film itself, but also experience the collision and integration between cultures, as well as the distinctive charm of traditional Chinese culture in contemporary cinema.

The nonlinear narration employed in "Cock and Bull" is far from a mere formal experiment; rather, it constitutes a profound ethical engineering project (Nussbaum 1990, 156). Through an asymmetrical representation of three distinct perspectives (Bordwell 2002, 178), director Cao Baoping systematically dismantles the prevailing ideal of moral judgment as "a clear mirror reflecting truth". The three narration perspectives—those of Song, Wang, and Dong—present divergent versions of the same event, each shaped by the narrator's ethical position and psychological condition. One of the film's most compelling narration devices is the reappearance of a white coat across these three perspectives. In Song's account, the coat functions as an ordinary clue that brings him closer to the truth; in Wang's narration, it becomes a symbol of fear and guilt, suggesting a suppressed involvement; while in Dong's version, it plays a different role altogether, potentially motivating his criminal behavior. This differentiated representation of the same object challenges the investigative principle of "Ge Wu Zhi Zhi"—the belief that one can attain knowledge and moral clarity through the examination of phenomena. The film suggests that even when faced with the same object, individuals interpret it through personal filters shaped by experience, position, and intention. This destabilizes moral certainties and complicates ethical judgment.

This strategy of epistemic subversion (Smith 2014, 78) deliberately keeps us in a perpetual state of interpretive suspension. As viewers, we are constantly recalibrating our moral assessments of the characters. Initially, Song may elicit sympathy and moral support for his relentless pursuit of justice. However, as the narration shifts to Wang's viewpoint, we begin to empathize with his helplessness and inner turmoil. Finally, Dong's seemingly irrational violence is reframed through glimpses of hidden motivations and emotional trauma. These shifting moral perceptions reveal the ethical complexity at the heart of the film's nonlinear design.

This concept of "Ethical Suspension Narration", a narration mechanism that intentionally delays or obstructs moral closure through techniques such as nonlinear structure, multi-perspectival storytelling, and temporal fragmentation. Unlike nihilistic narration (Jameson 1991, 156) characteristic of certain postmodern texts, ethically suspended narration maintains a dynamic equilibrium (Giddens 1984, 112) between competing moral frameworks—most notably, between institutional justice and underworld loyalty. These forces are not portrayed as mutually exclusive, but as coexisting and tension-laden, sustaining the narration's ethical ambiguity.

Moreover, this narration model possesses cognitive elasticity: as the plot unfolds through shifting perspectives, each character is provided with a comprehensible and often morally grounded rationale for their behavior. Viewers are compelled to constantly reconfigure their internal moral compass in response to new information. Finally, ethically suspended narration is marked by historical specificity (Williams 1977, 45). Rather than exploring universal human nature as in "Rashomon", the film anchors its ethical dilemmas in the concrete social contradictions of contemporary China—such as housing scams, legal inefficiencies, and social marginalization. These contextualized elements enable the audience to recognize reflections of their lived reality within the film, thereby deepening their engagement and moral contemplation.

Chapter 8 Conclusion – Toward a Chinese Auteur Paradigm

In the landscape of contemporary Chinese cinema, Cao Baoping's creative practice resembles a winding subterranean river—eroding the fixed boundaries of genre filmmaking while nourishing the aesthetic soil of auteur cinema. When we retrace his artistic trajectory with “Cock and Bull” as its endpoint, this seemingly absurdist black comedy reveals itself as a profound meditation on the ontology of film. Beneath its farcical narrative surface, the multi-threaded, non-linear structure not only deconstructs the conventions of traditional crime films but, through its strategy of “ethical suspension”, thrusts the audience into a vacuum of moral judgment. This creative approach resonates strikingly with “Dead End” Lacanian mirroring of subjectivity and “Einstein and Einstein's spatial metaphors for silent adolescent trauma, collectively mapping the director’s persistent excavation of human dilemmas.

Notably, Cao's aesthetic explorations exhibit a dual consciousness: in “Troublemakers”, he sculpts a localized violence aesthetics, while in “The Equation of Love and Death”, he experiments with transplanting film noir into native soil. This distinctive cinematic language—neither aligned with the Sixth Generation's documentary realism nor commercial cinema's spectacle—constructs a narrative space of dialectical tension between genre conventions and auteurist expression. Much like “Cock and Bull”’s perspectival shifts during its chaotic manhunt, Cao's oeuvre resists singular aesthetic categorization. Its significance lies in offering a theoretical paradigm to re-examine “Chinese auteur cinema”¹⁴³: where genre elements are imbued with philosophical weight, and regional narratives bear universal inquiries into humanity. Here, within this cinematic terrain interwoven with fury and poetry, a new paradigm quietly takes root.

8.1 A Review and Synthesis of Aesthetic Strategies

Cao Baoping stands as one of the most auteur-conscious directors in contemporary Chinese cinema. His creative journey reveals a distinct and continuous trajectory of aesthetic exploration, marked by a strong personal vision and a nuanced engagement with cinematic form. This study takes as its primary objects of analysis five of Cao Baoping's most representative works—“Dead End”, “The Equation of Love and Death”, “Einstein and Einstein”, “Troublemakers”, and “Cock and Bull”. Through a detailed deconstruction of the cinematic language deployed in these films, the study aims to uncover how Cao constructs a unique aesthetic paradigm that mediates between genre conventions and personal expression. Rather than adhering rigidly to any single cinematic tradition, Cao's directorial approach blends elements of realism, psychological drama, and genre cinema, forging a hybrid aesthetic that reflects both social reality and inner emotional landscapes. This chapter offers a comprehensive examination of Cao's aesthetic strategies by focusing on four key dimensions: narrative strategy, audiovisual grammar, character construction, and ethical expression. By analyzing these

¹⁴³ Chinese auteur cinema refers to film works by directors in China whose distinctive creative vision marks them as auteurs, often diverging from state-sanctioned narratives or commercial mainstream. These directors typically assert individual styles and recurring thematic preoccupations.

components, we seek to trace the internal logic and external manifestations of his cinematic aesthetics.

In terms of narrative strategy, Cao consistently resists linear storytelling in favor of fragmented, multi-perspective narratives that reflect the complexity and uncertainty of human experience. His films often explore moral ambiguity and psychological tension, presenting stories that unfold through non-chronological structures or subjective perspectives. For example, in “The Equation of Love and Death”, the plot is built around a fragmented mystery that intertwines personal loss with broader social disconnection, effectively blurring the boundaries between personal narrative and social commentary. This narrative style invites the audience into a participatory role, requiring them to piece together the story and engage critically with the characters' choices. In the realm of audiovisual grammar, Cao demonstrates a meticulous command of visual composition, color palettes, sound design, and editing rhythm. His visual style often contrasts stark, desaturated color tones with bursts of intense saturation, using lighting and framing to reflect psychological states. The handheld camera work in “Einstein and Einstein”, for instance, enhances the sense of adolescent instability and emotional rawness, while the tight close-ups and muted tones in “Dead End” underscore the claustrophobic guilt that permeates the narrative. Cao's use of sound is equally deliberate, with ambient noise and silence playing crucial roles in building tension and underscoring thematic depth. Character construction in Cao Baoping's films is equally complex and layered. His protagonists are often morally conflicted individuals, situated at the crossroads of personal desire and societal pressure. They are neither heroes nor villains, but deeply flawed, human figures struggling with internal contradictions. Whether it's the disillusioned youth Li Wan in “Einstein and Einstein” or the tormented Xin Xiaofeng in “Dead End”, Cao's characters serve as vessels for exploring broader questions about identity, responsibility, and the human condition. This depth of characterization not only grounds the narrative but also challenges the audience's ethical assumptions. Finally, ethical expression is a central axis of Cao's aesthetic vision. His films frequently pose challenging moral questions without offering clear resolutions. Rather than delivering didactic messages, Cao constructs ethical dilemmas that encourage reflection and debate. In the “Cock and Bull”, for example, the film probes the grey areas of justice and revenge, compelling the viewer to confront the uncomfortable coexistence of empathy and condemnation. This nuanced ethical stance reinforces the auteur's commitment to cinematic realism—not merely in visual style, but in the philosophical depth of his storytelling.

Cao's body of work exemplifies a sophisticated negotiation between artistic autonomy and genre storytelling. By weaving together fragmented narratives, expressive audiovisual techniques, multidimensional characters, and morally complex themes, he has established a distinctive aesthetic paradigm within contemporary Chinese cinema. This chapter thus serves to synthesize and evaluate the core strategies that define his unique cinematic voice.

Among the contemporary cohort of Chinese film directors, Cao distinguishes himself through a unique narrative style and acute sociocultural insight. With an academic pedigree—having served as a professor in the Department of Literature at the Beijing Film Academy—Cao's oeuvre reflects a synthesis of scholarly rigor and the dramatic sensibility characteristic of

commercial cinema. Significantly, his creative trajectory parallels the industrialization of the Chinese film sector, allowing for a delicate balance between the aesthetic aspirations of auteur cinema and commercial market success. This dissertation conducts a systematic analysis of three of Cao's representative works—"Troublemakers", "The Equation of Love and Death", and "Cock and Bull"—focusing on their narrative strategies. It projects how Cao's storytelling innovations extend the expressive boundaries of the Chinese crime genre. Further, it critically engages with the social metaphors and philosophical undercurrents inherent to these narratives. Cao's narrative innovation does not arise in a vacuum; rather, it must be understood in relation to the broader evolution of Chinese cinema since the 1990s. This period marked a movement away from monolithic political propaganda toward diversified narrative forms. This shift enabled the emergence of the so-called Sixth Generation directors, who experimented boldly with form and content. In Cao's case, his films simultaneously inherit the realist traditions of his predecessors and incorporate structural techniques from Hollywood genre cinema. This fusion engenders what scholars have termed the "auteur genre film" (Neale, S. 2000, 221–239) (Grant 2007, 134–150) (Elsaesser 2005, 218–224), combining personal artistic vision with the formal apparatus of crime-genre conventions. Through raw aesthetic choices and social commentary on rural vigilantism, Cao constructs a cinematic mode that is both socially charged and genre-refined in "Troublmaker". This hybrid stylistic approach marks a turning point in Chinese genre filmmaking. It signals a break from formulaic genre production, affirming that crime cinema can serve as a meaningful site for artistic innovation and cultural critique. Cao Baoping's films—through their complex narratives, ethically ambiguous characters, and socio-philosophical resonance—demonstrate how genre forms can intersect with personal expression and societal concern, enriching contemporary Chinese cinema's aesthetic and intellectual landscape.

As Cao's directorial debut, the "Troublemakers" reveals from the outset a deliberate intent to subvert conventional narrative paradigms. The film exemplifies a compelling narrative deconstruction of rural power structures and signifies a marked departure from conventional realist aesthetics toward a hybrid form that engages with documentary sensibilities. Although adapted from the novella *Rural Action* (乡村行动), Cao implements radical revisions to the original text, transforming its restrained social critique into an intense, dramatized narrative of political conflict. This act of adaptation underscores the director's assertion of narrative sovereignty and demonstrates his distinctive approach to transposing literary discourse into cinematic language.

The film adopts a multi-stranded narrative architecture, in which the primary storyline—centered on the escalating power struggle between village Party secretary Ye Guangrong and the four Xiong brothers—is intricately interlaced with several subsidiary plotlines. These include the villagers' socioeconomic precarity, the negligence and inefficacy of grassroots governance, and the disintegration of traditional ethical codes. Crucially, these threads are not organized as parallel episodes but are interwoven through meticulous montage, generating a dynamic and coherent representation of the rural political ecosystem. Of particular significance

is the employment of the outsider's gaze¹⁴⁴ (Nichols 1991, 107-110) as a narrative device: the viewer's access to the village's internal logic is mediated through Ye Guangrong, whose outsider status facilitates a gradual unveiling of systemic violence and hidden power structures. This perspective not only sustains narrative suspense but also frames our engagement with rural reality as a process of epistemological discovery.

From a stylistic standpoint, Cao demonstrates a formally hybrid aesthetic that synthesizes documentary realism with heightened dramatic articulation. In the first two-thirds of the film, the director employs handheld camera work, natural lighting, and performances by non-professional actors to evoke a strong sense of verisimilitude. These techniques lend the film a quasi-ethnographic quality, immersing the audience in the immediacy of rural life. This grounded aesthetic forms a credible foundation for the film's dramatic escalation in its final act. In the concluding thirty minutes, the film undergoes a stark stylistic transformation: violence erupts with theatrical intensity, bordering on hyperrealism. This shift—marked by a deliberate increase in narrative velocity and emotional intensity—functions metaphorically, gesturing toward the latent tensions and accumulated contradictions of rural society that eventually erupt into crisis. The pacing, often described as a "boiling frog" narrative structure¹⁴⁵, is thus invested with significant sociological resonance.

The film's temporal construction further amplifies its narrative and thematic complexity. While the dominant chronology remains linear, the insertion of strategically placed flashbacks enriches character development and reveals causal relationships otherwise hidden in the surface plot. For instance, the fragmentary recollections of the Xiong brothers' rise to local dominance serve not only to complicate their moral positioning but also to foreground the historical processes underlying the mutation of rural authority into an autocratic power regime. Such temporal layering endows the narrative with historical depth and intellectual density, allowing the film to operate simultaneously on realist, allegorical, and critical planes.

"The Equation of Love and Death" represents a significant milestone in Cao's ongoing experimentation with cinematic narrative. Departing from the rural milieu of his earlier works, the film relocates its story to an urban environment while continuing and deepening its critical engagement with social realities. In contrast to the multi-threaded structure of "Troublemakers", this film adopts a tightly focused, single-protagonist framework, constructing a subjective psychological space in which the boundaries between reality and illusion become increasingly porous. Centered on the obsessive quest of the taxi driver Li Mi,

¹⁴⁴ The "outsider's gaze" critiques the positionality of filmmakers or audiences who portray or consume marginalized subjects from a detached, often exoticizing perspective. Cao Baoping counters this by constructing immersive ethical spaces from within the community.

¹⁴⁵ 温水煮青蛙式叙事 "Boiling frog" narrative structure describes a plot that begins with gradual, almost imperceptible development before accelerating abruptly toward a violent climax. This structure mirrors how latent social tensions accumulate beneath surface normalcy until reaching a breaking point. In the film, this is embodied through the aesthetic shift from documentary-like realism to heightened theatrical violence.

this narrative strategy enables the film to move beyond the generic conventions of traditional crime cinema and instead engage with the internal spiritual crises of contemporary urban life.

The film's narrative architecture is notable for its layered complexity. On the surface, the plot revolves around Li Mi's persistent search for her missing boyfriend, Fang Wen. Beneath this apparent simplicity, however, lies a deeper thematic concern with issues of identity anxiety and existential dislocation experienced by urban individuals in post-socialist China. Cao deftly utilizes the "MacGuffin" device, positioning Fang Wen's disappearance as the central enigma propelling the narrative. Yet this plot device also acquires a powerful symbolic dimension, representing the elusive meaning of life that urban subjects relentlessly pursue yet are unable to secure. Through this dual-layered design, the film successfully maintains the suspense and accessibility of a genre film while simultaneously achieving the philosophical and aesthetic ambitions characteristic of art cinema.

A striking aspect of the film is its sophisticated manipulation of narrative perspective. For a significant portion of the film, the audience is confined to Li Mi's perceptual and epistemological framework. Events unfold strictly from her point of view, allowing viewers to experience firsthand her emotional volatility and psychological fragmentation. This restricted perspective intensifies the suspense while fostering a deep identification with the protagonist. As the narrative progresses, however, the film gradually expands its focalization to include the perspectives of other characters, constructing a multi-perspectival narrative mosaic. This shift not only contributes to the unraveling of the central mystery but also allegorizes the epistemic and communicative ruptures that characterize interpersonal relations in contemporary urban society.

The film's treatment of narrative time and space further enhances its psychological realism. Through the use of frequent flashbacks and nonlinear sequencing, the boundaries between past and present, reality and imagination, become increasingly blurred. In particular, the recurring memory fragments of Li Mi's past with Fang Wen—imbued with nostalgic tenderness—are set in stark contrast to her present despair, thereby emphasizing the fragmentation of memory and identity in modern life. This temporal disjunction produces a "psychological realism"¹⁴⁶ (Plantinga 2009, 106-112) effect, whereby time is rendered not as chronological continuity but as subjective experience, revealing the disoriented and fractured inner world of the protagonist.

Equally noteworthy is Cao's creative appropriation and localization of film noir conventions. The film integrates classic noir elements—such as investigative structures, fatalistic undertones, and moral ambiguity—within the specific socio-spatial context of contemporary urban China. The city of Kunming is rendered as a modern labyrinth: not merely a geographic setting but a symbolic landscape of existential perplexity and spiritual entrapment. The taxi, as a mobile spatial device, serves multiple narrative and symbolic functions: it is Li Mi's workplace, her

¹⁴⁶ The concept of psychological realism here is concerned with the representation of characters' inner lives, ethical complexity, and emotional subjectivity. Cao Baoping's cinema fuses this mode with Chinese narrative traditions and post-realist aesthetics to explore trauma, guilt, and moral collapse.

investigative tool, and a transient sanctuary from emotional disintegration. This dynamic interplay between spatial mobility and psychological stasis exemplifies Cao's narrative sophistication, revealing his capacity to fuse genre mechanics with deeper philosophical inquiry.

The "Cock and Bull" represents the apex of Cao's narrative experimentation, serving as both a stylistic culmination and a philosophical deepening of his cinematic inquiries. While the film is inspired by a real-life criminal case, Cao engages in a bold process of artistic reconfiguration, transforming the raw material of factual events into a complex narrative vehicle for probing the intricacies of human nature. The film's most striking narrative innovation lies in its employment of a circular narrative structure, articulated through five chapters and multiple perspectives that repeatedly recount the same central criminal incident. This polyphonic retelling produces a "Rashomon effect", deconstructing the traditional epistemology of truth in crime cinema while cultivating a unique aesthetic that juxtaposes absurdity with brutality.

The narrative structure is meticulously crafted around four principal segments, three of which are presented from the first-person perspectives of distinct characters—namely, the naive mechanic Song Laoer, the cunning petty criminal Wang Youquan, and the desperate assassin Dong Xiaofeng—culminating in another two chapters, ostensibly objective viewpoint that attempts to reassemble the fragmented narratives. Each chapter introduces new information and perspectival nuances, compelling the audience to continuously revise and complicate their understanding of the events depicted. This structure not only sustains a high level of narrative suspense but, more importantly, foregrounds the relativity and limitations of human cognition (Cao 2018, 135-150). As we can see, such a structure functions as an implicit critique of epistemological absolutism, suggesting instead that all representations of reality are inherently subjective and constructed.

From the perspective of narrative temporality, the film exhibits an unprecedented level of formal experimentation. Linear chronology is deliberately fragmented, and the temporal boundaries between past and present are rendered fluid. Particularly at pivotal narrative junctures, the same event is revisited across chapters, each iteration reshaped by the subjectivity of the narrator. This recursive temporal design not only enhances the film's structural complexity but also signals the unreliability of memory and narration as epistemic tools. In the final convergence of the three narrative threads, the film resists the conventional resolution associated with the crime genre—eschewing a definitive revelation of "truth"—and instead opens a discursive space for ambiguity, reflection, and ethical uncertainty.

One of the most distinguishing features of The "Cock and Bull" is its consistent use of black humor as a narrative and aesthetic device. By juxtaposing contrasting perspectives and affective registers, the film portrays the bleakness of social reality while simultaneously generating moments of absurdist comedy. For instance, the stubborn simplicity of Song Laoer, the opportunistic cleverness of Wang Youquan, and the chaotic desperation of Dong Xiaofeng manifest in radically different ways depending on the narrative vantage point. This approach

not only enriches character development but also exposes the precarious moral and existential conditions faced by individuals on the margins of Chinese society (Wang 2021).

Of particular analytical interest is the film's deployment of what may be termed an "ethical suspension" strategy. In contrast to conventional crime films, which typically adopt clear-cut moral positions, *The "Dead End"* intentionally maintains an ambivalent stance toward ethical judgment. The audience is prevented from easily categorizing characters as heroes or villains; rather, each individual makes context-specific decisions that are simultaneously rational and potentially tragic. This suspension of moral clarity compels the viewer to engage with the deeper complexities of human behavior, pushing beyond binary moral frameworks. Such ethical indeterminacy is reflective of the pluralistic and often contradictory value systems of contemporary Chinese society (Hu & Chen 2021, 237-261), and it is emblematic of Cao's nuanced engagement with social reality.

Based on the narrative analysis of the three aforementioned works, we can clearly discern their narrative innovations' developmental trajectory and inherent logic. From the multi-threaded narrative in *"Troublemakers"*, to the subjective psychological narrative in *"The Equation of Love and Death"*, and further to the circular multi-perspective narrative in *"Cock and Bull"*, Cao Baoping has consistently pushed the boundaries of traditional narrative frameworks, exploring greater possibilities for cinematic expression. This exploration is manifested not only on a technical level but has also influenced the development of Chinese genre films regarding aesthetic concepts and cultural expression.

Cao's narrative innovations carry significant cultural implications. Firstly, his works dismantle the binary opposition between art films and commercial cinema, demonstrating that genre films can equally convey profound social commentary and artistic pursuit. Secondly, his narrative experiments have opened new avenues of expression for Chinese cinema, expanding the boundaries of film language. Most importantly, his works maintain a steadfast focus on social reality, employing innovative narrative forms to deepen the exploration of societal issues. From a broader perspective, his narrative innovations represent the cultural consciousness of Chinese filmmakers within a globalized context. His works assimilate narrative techniques from Western modernist cinema while remaining firmly rooted in China's specific sociocultural soil. This practice of fusion and innovation offers crucial insights for the future development of Chinese cinema. In an era of increasing globalization within the film industry, Cao Baoping's narrative experiments undoubtedly provide valuable references for maintaining cultural subjectivity while pursuing artistic innovation.

Through our analysis of Cao's works, it becomes evident that genre films can transcend mere entertainment and, through narrative innovation, carry deeper intellectual engagement. As the Chinese film market matures and audience aesthetic standards continue to rise, this "auteur-genre cinema" that balances artistic merit and commercial appeal may emerge as an important creative direction. As a pioneer in this field, the value of Cao's narrative experiments will undoubtedly receive more comprehensive recognition and deeper scholarly investigation.

In the “Troublemakers”, Cao pioneers what may be termed a distinctive “rustic violence aesthetic”¹⁴⁷, a highly recognizable visual paradigm that has since become emblematic of certain strands of contemporary Chinese cinema. Shot on 35mm film stock, the film achieves a striking visual texture through extensive on-location cinematography in Zhaotong, Yunnan. More than half of the footage was captured using handheld cameras, whose inherent instability resonates meaningfully with the film’s rural setting and socio-political unrest. This stylistic decision, far from being purely technical, establishes a visceral link between form and content, underscoring the volatility of life in peripheral regions of China (Zhang 2017, 143).

The lighting design further exemplifies Cao’s experimental ethos. In pursuit of an authentic recreation of the natural illumination characteristic of rural northeastern Yunnan, the production deliberately eschewed artificial lighting setups. Instead, it relied on practical sources such as kerosene lamps and handheld flashlights. In a pivotal scene—Xiong Lao San’s ambush—tungsten lighting was strategically deployed to mimic moonlight, producing a suffocating low-key aesthetic. This chiaroscuro lighting not only intensifies the film’s quasi-documentary realism but also functions metaphorically, evoking the villagers’ constrained existence under the oppressive weight of invisible power structures.

A notable example of Cao’s stylization of violence can be found in the farming-tool brawl sequence. Slow-motion cinematography transforms the trajectory of swinging hoes and other implements into carefully choreographed, almost balletic visual movements. The stylization aestheticizes what might otherwise be dismissed as brute rural conflict, compelling the viewer to engage with violence as both a narrative mechanism and a sensory phenomenon. Simultaneously, the sound design layers metallic clangs with the visceral impact of bodily collisions, crafting a dense sonic landscape that accentuates the embodied experience of violence while distancing it from conventional realist depictions common in rural-themed Chinese films.

Equally sophisticated is the film’s symbolic use of color. A predominantly desaturated palette—dominated by muted earthen hues—serves to foreground the materiality of rural life, reinforcing themes of deprivation, inertia, and decay. Against this subdued visual field, sudden bursts of crimson emerge during scenes of heightened violence, functioning as shocking visual ruptures. These chromatic interventions are not merely aesthetic flourishes but operate as diegetic cues that mirror characters’ psychological breakdowns and underscore latent tensions within the social fabric. In this sense, color itself becomes a narrative device, articulating emotional and thematic undercurrents that words cannot express.

Taken together, these visual and auditory strategies illustrate Cao Baoping’s sophisticated manipulation of cinematic form to interrogate the socio-political realities of China’s rural

¹⁴⁷ 土味暴力美学 The “rustic violence aesthetic” in contemporary Chinese cinema draws from folk resistance motifs and visual traditions rooted in agrarian realism. Cao Baoping’s articulation of this aesthetic reimagines classical rebellion narratives like *Water Margin* while embedding them in modern sociopolitical critique.

periphery. The “Troublemakers” thus stands not merely as a genre experiment, but as a formally rigorous meditation on marginality, power, and the aesthetics of violence.

“Einstein and Einstein” exhibit a markedly different aesthetic pursuit than “Troublemakers”. Over half of its shots employ fixed camera positions, constant aperture settings, and prime lenses, creating a delicate and subdued visual tone. This restrained cinematography mirrors the psychological world of the adolescent protagonist Li Wan while resonating with Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power—the camera operates as the patriarchal gaze, framing Li Wan's actions with clinical precision, perpetually placing her in a state of surveillance and discipline (Foucault 1977, 201). The film's spatial construction is deeply metaphorical. In domestic scenes, director Cao Baoping utilizes architectural elements such as doorframes and windows to create closed compositions, symbolizing the family's suffocating control over individual freedom. Li Wan's bedroom, initially a private sanctuary, gradually transforms into an invaded space as her younger brother and grandmother encroach upon it—a visual metaphor for the erosion of her autonomy and her forced submission to the violent logic of adulthood.

The film pioneers an innovative “silent roar” sound strategy. In the pivotal scene where Li Wan is slapped by her father, an extended silence is abruptly followed by the gradual intrusion of ambient white noise, creating intense psychological tension. This technique aligns with Roland Barthes' concept of the punctum—the absence of sound is not mere emptiness but a piercing point that forces the audience to confront the brutality of violence (Barthes 1980, 27). The film's climax reinforces this approach when the brother's cries at the ice rink are deliberately muted, making “enforced silence”¹⁴⁸ a more devastating emotional expression than any scream. This auditory strategy not only amplifies the film's oppressive atmosphere but also reveals how familial violence, through daily discipline, becomes internalized as psychological trauma.

The recurring motif of milk serves as a masterful semiotic construct. While ostensibly a symbol of “care”, it simultaneously functions as an instrument of coercion. Despite Li Wan and her brother's lactose intolerance, they are forced to drink milk under the pretext of “nutritional balance”—a detail that precisely illustrates Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (Butler 1990, 33). Through this act of forced feeding, parental authority inscribes social norms onto the children's bodies, conditioning them into prescribed gender roles (Li Wan as the “obedient girl”¹⁴⁹, and her brother as the “resilient boy”¹⁵⁰). The repeated presence of milk

¹⁴⁸ It refers to Li Wan (in the film *Einstein and Einstein*) losing her voice under patriarchal oppression. Financially dependent on her father, she recognizes communication as futile, thus abandoning dialogue and retreating into silence.

¹⁴⁹ 乖乖女 “Guāi Guāi Nǚ” (Obedient Girl) Refers to girls who strictly conform to traditional family/societal expectations, characterized by being docile, academically excellent, and rule-abiding, while suppressing personal needs to please patriarchal authority. This label implies constraints on female autonomy, prevalent in East Asian contexts, and functions as implicit discipline masked as “sensible” behavior.

¹⁵⁰ 男子汉 “Nánzihàn” A culturally constructed masculine ideal in Chinese society emphasizing traits like emotional stoicism, physical/responsibility toughness, and unwavering duty to protect family/nation. Rooted in Confucian role ethics, it demands men suppress vulnerability (“流血不流泪” – bleed but never shed tears) to

exposes the absurdity of familial power structures, revealing how "love" often masks violent discipline.

The profundity of "Einstein and Einstein" lies in its refusal to depict domestic violence as overt conflict. Instead, through meticulous audiovisual language, it demonstrates how power infiltrates daily life under the guise of "love". The film offers no redemption—Li Wan's resignation and her brother's silent weeping paint a harrowing portrait of growth in disciplinary society, where resistance ultimately succumbs to silence, and the true violence lies in the normalization of that silence (Foucault 1977, 228).

The cinematic language of "Dead End" demonstrates sophisticated theoretical consciousness. The director's decision to shoot on location in Xiamen creates a distinctive urban noir visual style. Employing a 2.35:1 anamorphic widescreen ratio with extensive mirror compositions, the film creatively utilizes reflective surfaces - taxi windshields, water surfaces, mirrors and windows - to keep characters perpetually in a state of being "gazed". The lighting system possesses philosophical depth. Particularly in the prison dialogue scene between Xin Xiaofeng and Yi Guchun, the amber light casts prison bar shadows across Xin's body, externalizing his inner conflict while the warm tones suggest paradoxical comfort. On one hand, after seven years of fugitive life, he can finally confess his sins without hiding in fear; on the other, his near-suicidal confession secures a peaceful upbringing for his adopted daughter. This precisely reflects Xin's complex, contradictory nature - a wrongdoer who staunchly upholds his own moral code. The long-take choreography exhibits astonishing control. The rooftop chase sequence employs crane shots with multiple focus pulls within brief duration. Sound design blends ambient noise with amplified heartbeat to create physiological tension. Such audiovisual treatment not only enhances cinematic tension but also deepens character portrayal.

The core aesthetic value of Cao Baoping's films lies in their creative transformation of traditional ethical concepts. In the "Troublemakers", the conventional narrative motif of "oppressive officials driving peasants to rebellion"¹⁵¹ receives a modern reinterpretation. The film's ending, where villagers overthrow the local tyrant through even more brutal violence, sharply poses an ethical dilemma: When institutional justice fails, does grassroots violence possess legitimacy? This profound revelation of cyclical violence elevates the film beyond simple social critique, ascending to philosophical contemplation of human nature. "Cock and Bull" achieves a breakthrough in ethical expression through an innovative narrative structure. The same event, viewed from multiple perspectives, presents entirely different moral landscapes: Song Laoer is both perpetrator and victim, while the police serve as both agents of justice and tools of the system. This expression of ethical relativism reflects the reality of value pluralism in contemporary Chinese society while injecting crime genre films with a fresh

embody unquestioned authority. Modern critique highlights its role in perpetuating toxic masculinity and mental health stigma.

¹⁵¹ 官逼民反 The theme "oppression breeds rebellion" originates from both traditional Chinese cultural narratives and Maoist-revolutionary interpretations of peasant uprisings. *Water Margin* (施耐庵, 14th century) exemplifies this ethos in literature, while Mao Zedong's writings on class struggle and justifiable resistance against feudal or bureaucratic power solidify it as a political axiom. In contemporary cinema, this is recontextualized through aesthetic and symbolic violence.

intellectual dimension. “Dead End” pushes ethical inquiry into psychological and moral territory. The three protagonists' acts of self-redemption—raising an orphaned girl, and sacrificing themselves to save others — starkly contrast to their criminal pasts. This spiritual dilemma of "crime and punishment" simultaneously echoes the introspective notion of "inherent human goodness"¹⁵², creating an ethically charged space for reflection.

Through a systematic examination of Cao's cinematic aesthetics, we can discern a new developmental path for Chinese auteur cinema. This path neither slavishly follows the aesthetic paradigms of Western art films nor completely surrenders to the narrative conventions of commercial genre cinema. Instead, it creates a new cinematic form that possesses both intellectual depth and entertainment value through the dialectical synthesis of these two approaches. Cao's creative practice demonstrates that the aesthetic breakthroughs in Chinese cinema may precisely stem from a "creative misreading" of established paradigms—identifying fissures within genre conventions while embedding profound reflections within commercial frameworks. His films' explosive anger, poetic moments, and ethical dilemmas collectively constitute some of the most illuminating aesthetic experiments in contemporary Chinese cinema.

8.2 Theoretical Frameworks Applied and Extended

Within contemporary film studies, methodological innovation remains a central imperative. Owing to their distinctive aesthetic signatures and incisive social critiques, the films of Cao Baoping constitute fertile ground for theoretical inquiry. The present study adopts a dual-path methodological structure: it recontextualizes established theories through creative adaptation and formulates original conceptual tools derived from close textual analysis. This twofold strategy mitigates the pitfalls of purely empirical "micro-reading", which can lapse into fragmentation, and guards against the distortions that arise from an overly theory-driven stance. Analyzing the oeuvre of an auteur as stylistically idiosyncratic as Cao Baoping demands both conceptual precision and theoretical elasticity. The analytical apparatus must be sufficiently fine-grained to register the nuanced formal gestures embedded in his work, yet supple enough to accommodate its cross-generic and cross-cultural inflections. Guided by this methodological sensibility, the study aims to construct an interpretive model that illuminates the specificities of Cao's cinema and possesses a measure of generalizability for broader applications in film scholarship.

In the contemporary theoretical landscape of film studies, methodological innovation remains a critical concern. The works of director Cao Baoping, with their distinctive aesthetic style and profound social insight, provide fertile ground for theoretical inquiry. This study adopts a dual-path methodological orientation: it emphasizes the creative adaptation of existing theories to

¹⁵² 性善论 A foundational Confucian doctrine formulated by *Mencius* (孟子), asserting that humans are born with innate moral inclinations ("Four Beginnings": compassion, shame, courtesy, discernment). These "sprouts" (端 *duān*) naturally develop into virtues (benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom) through ethical cultivation – contrasting *Xunzi*'s "innate evil" view. It underpins Confucian faith in self-perfection via education and benevolent governance.

new contexts while also constructing original theoretical paradigms through close textual analysis. This approach mitigates the fragmentation inherent in purely empirical readings and counters the limitations of overly theory-driven interpretations. When analyzing the films of an auteur such as Cao Baoping—whose works exhibit a distinctive authorial voice—the precision of analytical concepts and the flexibility of theoretical models become especially essential. The goal, then, is to develop a theoretical architecture capable of illuminating Cao's unique cinematic language while offering frameworks applicable to broader contexts.

This dual-strategy approach integrates classical aesthetic theory with original theoretical constructions derived from detailed film analysis. Such a theoretical duet expands the interpretive reach of film studies and opens up novel methodological pathways for Chinese cinema research.

One of the theoretical instruments in this study is Lin Niantong's "Mirroring–Drifting" Theory, which is applied to the experimental analysis of “Dead End”. Originally designed to explore identity conflicts in Hong Kong cinema, the theory is expanded in this study to accommodate the narrative and aesthetic dimensions of mainland Chinese noir by integrating Lacanian psychoanalysis, the aesthetic logic of film noir, and a narrative-driven moral configuration.

This study marks the first systematic application of the theory to the Chinese mainland noir genre. Through a rigorous adaptation process, a three-layered mirroring model—physical, psychological, and cultural—is established to reveal the existential and identity dilemmas experienced by urban characters in post-millennial China (Lin, 2008). Furthermore, a drifting narrative model encompassing spatial, temporal, and ethical dimensions is developed. In spatial terms, Michel Foucault's (1986) theory of heterotopia is invoked to decode the symbolic import of urban spaces such as Xiamen, which serve as liminal zones reflecting power dynamics and marginality. Temporally, traumatic flashbacks disrupt linear chronology, analyzed here through the Freudian concept of "repetition compulsion" (Freud, 1920/1955), thereby illustrating how unresolved trauma fractures subjective time. Ethically, the narrative suggests a potential modern reformulation of the narrative-driven conception of “heavenly mandate”(天命), thereby engaging in a dialectical tension between legal rationality and moral intuition (Lin, 2008).

These theoretical applications are grounded in close textual analyses of three emblematic scenes. The police interrogation room is interpreted as a heterotopic enclosure, foregrounding the operation of power through spatial confinement (Foucault, 1986). The recurrent flashbacks of the murder case exemplify psychoanalytic repetition, underscoring the accumulation of trauma through cinematic form (Freud, 1920/1955). The film's conclusion, which places vigilante justice in conflict with the legal process, exposes the moral ambiguities of contemporary justice, thereby reflecting a broader ethical crisis rooted in the divergence between a culturally embedded moral order and state law (Lin, 2008). Crucially, this analytical strategy also reveals the broader cultural contradictions confronting modern China. By interrogating the antagonism between procedural justice and culturally rooted notions of karmic retribution, and examining how technological elements such as DNA testing destabilize

mythic structures of cause and consequence, the study demonstrates how noir aesthetics can articulate the modern crisis of a narrative-driven moral configuration (Lin, 2008).

Parallel to this theoretical application, the study develops several analytical concepts grounded in specific case studies but possessing broader methodological significance. One such concept is the "Sound–Space Narrative Matrix"¹⁵³, developed through a close reading of "Einstein and Einstein". This model transcends the limitations of conventional film sound studies by fusing sonic design with spatial politics. In *Einstein and Einstein*, domestic silence is juxtaposed with the chaos of institutional spaces such as schools, while the near-silent skating rink emerges as a transcendent third space. By constructing a three-dimensional coordinate system—sound frequency (high vs. low), spatial characteristics (open vs. closed), and emotional tonality (intense vs. repressed)—the model delineates how acoustic design participates in spatial meaning-making. For example, in the scene where Li Wan is coerced into drinking milk, the exaggerated swallowing sounds in a confined kitchen space convert a mundane act into a symbolically charged scene of bodily discipline and social control.

Another major theoretical contribution is the concept of "Ethical Suspension", derived from the fragmented and multi-perspective narrative structure of "Cock and Bull". The film's five interwoven storylines each reframe the central crime, resulting in a shifting moral compass that defies stable ethical interpretation. In one sequence, Song Laoer is framed as a sadistic murderer; later, he is reconstituted as a desperate avenger; and finally, he emerges as a victim of structural violence. These continual shifts unsettle conventional ethical binaries and generate a sustained state of moral indeterminacy. Unlike postmodern notions of "moral ambiguity", this ethical suspension is deeply embedded in the Chinese triadic legal-cultural matrix¹⁵⁴ of *qing* 情-*li* 礼-*fa* 法 (sentiment–reason–law), and thus provides an Indigenous lens through which to interpret the ethics of narrative form under modern pressures (Lin, 2008).

In addition, the study reconfigures existing theories of cinematic violence by localizing them through the concept of "rustic violence" (*Tuwei Baoli*)¹⁵⁵. Based on an analysis of "Troublemakers", this term refers to a modality of violence specific to rural China. Unlike the choreographed shootouts of Hong Kong action cinema or the minimalist brutality of Takeshi Kitano, rustic violence is characterized by improvised weaponry—hoes, shovels, sticks—and primal conflict over basic survival. Here, violence becomes a visceral expression of material deprivation and moral decay, stripped of aesthetic glamour and deeply embedded in the rural social imaginary.

¹⁵³ The term *Sound–Space Narrative Matrix* refers to the dynamic interaction between sonic elements and spatial configurations in constructing cinematic narrative experience. This echoes Chion's (1994) theory of "synchresis"—the spontaneous and irresistible weld of sound and image—as well as Marks' (2000) exploration of embodied spectatorship, where space is not only seen but "felt" through sound.

¹⁵⁴ The "triadic legal-cultural matrix" is an analytical model that links legal institutions, cultural values, and narrative strategies within film to express ethical tensions and institutional critique.

¹⁵⁵ 土味暴力 The term "rustic violence" denotes a genre-inflected aesthetic of violence that draws from the physical, symbolic, and cultural textures of rural life. It is particularly prominent in Chinese cinema as a way of expressing socio-political resistance or moral ambiguity through grounded, bodily confrontation.

Although these theoretical models originate from analyzing Cao Baoping's filmography, their applicability extends beyond a single auteur. They offer tools for analyzing other Chinese-language films that negotiate similar cultural tensions and stylistic formations. Moreover, they provide potential interfaces for intercultural dialogue within global film studies. Most importantly, they exemplify how theoretical specificity and textual sensitivity can be harmonized within rigorous scholarly inquiry.

The hallmark of this study's theoretical contribution is its dual methodological awareness: it resists both the abstraction of theory removed from textual engagement and the triviality of data-driven empiricism devoid of conceptual depth. The analysis of “Dead End” using Mirroring-Drifting Theory (Lin, 2008), for instance, is both anchored in detailed visual-textual evidence and expansively theorized through interdisciplinary insight.

Looking forward, these theoretical models may be refined and extended in several promising directions. First, they could be applied in comparative studies across broader Chinese cinema contexts, including Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the Sinophone diaspora. Second, integrating digital humanities tools such as scene-level annotation and audio-visual data mapping could enhance the precision and replicability of formal analysis. Third, these concepts might be tested within transnational contexts to explore their adaptability to other cinematic traditions confronting similar ethical, spatial, and cultural dilemmas. Such developments affirm the broader methodological significance of constructing theory through rigorous textual engagement.

8.3 Interdisciplinary Synthesis and Implications

Cao Baoping's filmography offers a rich terrain for interdisciplinary exploration, intricately weaving together psychoanalysis, existential philosophy, ethics, spatial politics, and Chinese folk aesthetics. This convergence does not merely result in a theoretical collage; rather, through inventive cinematic translation, it achieves a seamless integration of heterogeneous intellectual traditions with visual expressivity. This study contends that analyzing Cao Baoping's films can dialectically and innovatively integrate different theories: embedding Lacanian mirror theory within an internally anchored moral framework in “Dead End”; reconfiguring China's subaltern realities through noir conventions in “The Equation of Love and Death”; and infusing Foucauldian disciplinary critique¹⁵⁶ into coming-of-age narratives in “Einstein and Einstein”. Through such acts of synthesis, it pioneers a methodologically innovative mode of

¹⁵⁶ A theoretical lens from Michel Foucault, focusing on how modern institutions regulate individuals by disciplining their bodies and internalizing power structures—creating what he called “docile bodies” (Foucault, M. 1977). In “Einstein and Einstein”, Li Wan's forced consumption of milk and dog meat exemplifies such disciplinary rituals.

"interdisciplinary cinematic practice"¹⁵⁷, expanding the expressive possibilities of film and charting new directions for Sinophone film studies¹⁵⁸.

"Dead End" deploys a nuanced application of the "mirroring–drifting" theory in conjunction with psychoanalytic frameworks to execute a sophisticated narrative-driven moral configuration. This configuration critically maps the ambiguous terrain of contemporary justice, foregrounding the ethical crisis born of the divergence between a culturally embedded moral order and state law. The film constructs a tripartite mirror schema—physical, social, and ethical—that visually and narratively materializes this tension. Physical mirrors (water surfaces, car windows) externalize the protagonist Xin Xiaofeng's fractured psyche; the social mirror, embodied by the investigator Yi Guchun as a Lacanian Superego, enacts relentless moral surveillance; and the ethical mirror, represented by the orphaned child Weiba, serves as a silent, potent rebuke to past transgressions. This structure dramatizes the conflict between an introspective moral consciousness (exemplified by the concept of Shendu, or vigilance in solitude) and the external, disciplinary "gaze of the Other." The climax of this conflict is not presented discursively but is somatically realized in Xin's asthmatic convulsions—his labored breaths and trembling body becoming the visceral site where abstract guilt, legal judgment, and redemptive yearning converge. Thus, through its narrative, the film does not resolve ethical dilemmas but suspends them, compelling viewers to confront the irreducible ambiguity where personal atonement, cultural notions of retribution, and procedural justice collide.

In "The Equation of Love and Death", Cao constructs an existentialist parable, using both narrative structure and audiovisual form to explore ontological themes of absurdity, freedom, and identity. The theme of absurdity is embodied in Li Mi's obsessive four-year search for her lost boyfriend. Her repetitive taxi rides and blind hope mirror Albert Camus' "Sisyphean dilemma"¹⁵⁹ (Camus 1942/1991, 119-123), rendering modern life as an endless, futile cycle. Freedom and choice surface through the figure of Fang Wen, who oscillates between criminal complicity and romantic longing. His hesitations—captured in trembling hands and backward glances—evoke Sartre's concept of being "condemned to be free", as he confronts the anguish of self-determination. Destabilized selfhood is visually encoded through handheld camerawork and recurring numerical motifs, transforming the taxi into a mobile existential lab¹⁶⁰ where identity is continually in flux.

¹⁵⁷ *"Interdisciplinary cinematic practice"* refers to film work that fuses methods and theories from different disciplines into the creative and interpretive process (see Bordwell, 1989; Stam, 2000). Here, it often involves blending philosophy, politics, psychology, and aesthetic theory into narrative and formal construction (see Carroll, 2008; Nichols, 2010; Elsaesser, 2016).

¹⁵⁸ This term examines Chinese-language cinema across geopolitical regions (e.g. Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Southeast Asia), emphasizing the heterogeneity of Chinese cultural expressions and resisting a nation-centric cinematic narrative (Shih, S. 2007). Cao Baoping's integration of Yunnan dialects and regional imagery aligns with this decentralizing approach.

¹⁵⁹ The phrase "Sisyphean dilemma" originates from Camus's existentialist philosophy, which uses the myth of Sisyphus to symbolize the absurd struggle of human existence. In "The Equation of Love and Death", this dilemma is materialized through Li Mi's unending quest, aligning with Camus's notion of perseverance in the face of absurdity.

¹⁶⁰ Borrowing from existentialist thought, an "existential lab" refers to narrative situations where characters confront moral ambiguity and existential crises under extreme conditions (Sartre, J.-P. 1943). In *The Dead End*,

The film's philosophical crescendo occurs in a long-take monologue on a bridge. As the camera transitions from a detached god's-eye perspective to a grounded, human-level view, ambient sound fades into an existential vacuum. Li Mi's tremulous voice resonates within this silence, etching personal trauma into metaphysical inquiry. The closing tear-streaked close-up ultimately reconciles absurdity with human dignity, embodying existential tragedy in cinematic form.

Cao's spatial aesthetics function as metaphors for power dynamics, exemplifying Michel Foucault's dialectic of discipline and resistance. Nowhere is this more evident than in "Einstein and Einstein", where spatial arrangements articulate the protagonist's struggle for autonomy. Disciplinary spaces—including rigidly symmetrical shots of dining tables and classroom desks—visualize patriarchal authority and institutional control. These domestic and scholastic environments operate as prisons masked by familiarity. Transitional spaces, such as school corridors filmed with Dutch angles and disorienting tracking shots, mirror Li Wan's liminal identity and her failed bids for independence. Illusory spaces, most notably the planetarium, reveal the deceptive promises of liberation. Wide-angle lenses distort perspective, exposing the artificiality of the stars Li Wan reaches for—symbols of dreams foreclosed by systemic constraints.

A recurring milk cup motif further crystallizes spatial politics. From coercive scenes of enforced milk consumption—highlighted by close-ups of stained lips—to episodes of voluntary dog meat swallowing at public banquets, Li Wan's passage into adulthood is framed as a progressive erasure of agency. The most haunting expression of this theme occurs on the ice rink: overhead shots dwarf the figure of her struggling brother, while the coach's authoritarian commands echo the panoptic logic of surveillance—external discipline internalized into self-regulation.

Cao's "Cock and Bull" destabilizes traditional ethical binaries through a postmodern narrative structure, continually challenging the viewer's moral compass. Judgment is problematized through a multiperspective storytelling technique that replaces omniscient narration with fragmented viewpoints. The question of "who can judge?" remains deliberately unresolved, immersing the audience in an ethical labyrinth. Morality is decentered as ideals of Renyi (benevolence and righteousness) rooted in a culturally embedded moral order collide with survivalist pragmatism. Song's self-preservation and Dong's income-driven violence collapse the dichotomy of good versus evil into a gray zone of moral relativism. Justice is rendered absurd through ironic reversals: the killer's death, framed as an accident, mocks karmic causality and exposes the contingency of retributive ethics.

Spatially, the Yunnan plateau chase sequence enacts the collapse of ethical clarity. As Dong abducts Song's son across blood-red clay roads, the twisting mountain paths reduce moral conflict to a raw, corporeal contest. The stark terrain—naked rock, blazing sun, flying mud—

the moral decay and tension among the three male leads serve as a cinematic testing ground for Sartrean concepts of guilt and authenticity.

strips away civilization's moral pretenses. Here, topography becomes ethics; the scorched earth is no longer a backdrop but a metaphorical crucible where values are tested and undone.

Cao's sonic strategies constitute a parallel semiotic system (Roland Barthes 1957), in which sound functions as an autonomous conveyor of psycho-ethical meaning. This is especially apparent in "Dead End". The evolution of sirens—from ambient background noise to moral imperative—traces Xin's descent into internalized judgment. What begins as environmental sound transforms into an accusatory presence during his nocturnal solitude. Asthmatic acoustics are amplified in enclosed settings—cars, interrogation rooms—to externalize guilt's corporeal toll. Wheezes and gasps dramatize the psychic weight of repression. Rain, as an auditory and symbolic device, reaches an operatic intensity during the hideout's exposure. Torrential downpours evoke both catharsis and punishment, with roof-thumping impacts, muddy groundflows, and thunderous bass constructing a natural symphony of reckoning.

The film's sonic climax unfolds at Chen Bijue's cliffside suicide. Heartbeats and crashing waves compose an acoustic lament. Absolute silence accompanies his fall, transforming the moment into a transcendent void. This void is shattered by Yi Guxia's mute sob upon receiving Weiba's bone-age report, completing a cycle of theological redemption through sound's erasure and return. In this sense, the cliff becomes more than a location—it is consecrated as an ethical altar.

Cao's films offer three key methodological contributions to film studies: First, western theories undergo creative indigenization. "Dead End", for instance, synthesizes Lacanian notions of the gaze with a culturally embedded moral framework that upholds ideals of innate goodness, generating a uniquely Chinese "psycho-ethical" tension between personal guilt and external moral scrutiny. Secondly, films like "Cock and Bull" dismantle genre conventions through multi-perspectival narration and temporal fragmentation, reconfiguring crime cinema into an arena for moral experimentation. Lastly, Cao interrogates and reconfigures traditional cultural codes. The knight-errant ethos¹⁶¹ is tested against the brutal pragmatism of modern survival ("Cock and Bull"), while a culturally rooted doctrine of filial piety is subjected to Foucauldian critique ("Einstein and Einstein"). This analytical decoding and reassembly resemble genetic sequencing¹⁶²: cultural archetypes are first analyzed, and then re-engineered with critical modernity.

Cao Baoping's cinema enacts a triple-layered methodological breakthrough: Ontologically, his films become interdisciplinary laboratories, where embodied performances—such as Xin's asthmatic collapse—materialize philosophical tensions between Lacanian psychoanalysis and

¹⁶¹ A Confucian and wuxia-derived moral tradition emphasizing personal justice, loyalty, and resistance to corrupt power (Louie, K. 2002). In "Cock and Bull", Song Laoer enacts a localized, rough-hewn version of this ethos in his pursuit of justice outside official systems.

¹⁶² A metaphor for how directors recombine genre codes and visual languages into personalized styles, much like genetic recombination (Altman, R.1999) (Bordwell, D. 2008). Cao's films integrate realism, noir, and melodrama into a hybrid form that reflects his authorial signature.

a narrative-driven moral configuration. Epistemologically, new paradigms emerge in which images themselves theorize: spatial politics articulate Foucauldian power; ethical aporias unfold through mise-en-scène and narrative rupture. Methodologically, his cinema exemplifies theory-image dialectics¹⁶³. The interrogation room mirrors in “Dead End” do not merely represent Lacanian concepts—they perform them, while simultaneously invoking an internally anchored ethical concern.

In Cao's world, crime thrillers metamorphose into Epistemic Practice¹⁶⁴ (Hall, S. 1980, 128-138) (Rancière 2006); a culturally embedded sense of compassion collides with virtues of benevolence and righteousness; the trembling bodies in rain, silences on the cliff, and disciplined youths on the ice become aesthetic coordinates for remapping knowledge itself. His films thus transcend storytelling, evolving into a new form of knowledge production—cinema as philosophy in motion.

8.4 Reimagining Chinese Auteurism: Final Reflections

In the entangled dynamics of globalization and localization in contemporary Chinese cinema, Cao Baoping's creative practice delineates a distinctive "third path"—neither a strict adherence to the art-house manifesto nor a mere replication of commercial genre formulas. Rather, his work articulates an aesthetic paradigm that achieves a nuanced equilibrium between realist and modern cinematic language. This creative orientation not only redefines the essence of auteur cinema in China but also exhibits a profound authorial consciousness through structural experimentation, sound design, and ethical reconstruction, offering a compelling developmental model for twenty-first-century Sinophone cinema.

Cao Baoping's authorship is most immediately evident in his aesthetic encoding of the Chinese lived experience. His films are deeply rooted in local social realities, transforming regional culture into universal metaphors through idiosyncratic audiovisual grammar. In the “Troublemakers”, for example, violence is ritualized through the use of agrarian tools, with swinging hoes and splashing mud forming a visceral spectacle of primal confrontation. This sequence not only inherits the narrative DNA of the "oppression-breeds-rebellion" motif from *Water Margin*¹⁶⁵ but also subverts rural power dynamics via a critical modern lens: when

¹⁶³ A concept that describes how abstract theory is translated into cinematic language—whether visually, aurally, or performatively (Chion, M. 1994) (Marks, L. U. (2000). In *The Dead End*, Cao achieves this through his use of "acoustic collapse", where theological judgment is embodied by a sudden drop into total silence.

¹⁶⁴ In film theory, this refers to how narratives structure viewer knowledge and ethical perception. Cao's multi-perspective storytelling (e.g. in “*Cock and Bull*”) functions as an epistemic strategy, forcing audiences to navigate uncertainty and moral complexity.

¹⁶⁵ *Water Margin* (水浒传), one of China's Four Great Classical Novels, was authored by Shi Nai'an during the late Yuan and early Ming dynasties (see Luo, 2011; Plaks, 1987). As China's first vernacular chapter-based epic, it draws from the historical Song Jiang uprising in the late Northern Song Dynasty (see Zhang, 2014). The story depicts 108 heroes who, oppressed by corrupt officials, gather at Liangshan Marsh, raise the banner of “acting on Heaven's behalf” to rebel against the corrupt court, later accept amnesty, and fight for the state (see Shapiro, 1981). Its core themes—“oppression leads to rebellion” and loyalty—are embodied in iconic chivalric figures like Lin Chong, Wu Song, and Lu Zhishen (see Huang, 2018; Rolston, 1990). The novel profoundly exposes ancient social conflicts and is hailed as the pinnacle of Chinese chivalric culture, with influence spanning East Asia (see Hegel, 2001; Idema & Haft, 1997).

Xiong Laosan's blood seeps into the red soil, an "rustic aesthetics of violence" vividly articulates the paradox of grassroots resistance.

In "Cock and Bull", ethical dilemmas are spatially externalized through Yunnan's arid landscapes, which serve as material extensions of moral ambiguity. Winding dirt roads destabilize linear conceptions of justice, while the unrelenting sunlight strips away ethical pretenses. When Song Laoer and Dong Xiaofeng grapple on the clay-red earth, the mud that sullies their bodies transforms the terrain into a topological field of moral crisis. "Einstein and Einstein" advances this mode of symbolic realism by unveiling disciplinary mechanisms through micro-rituals of the everyday. The close-up of a milk-stained lip during enforced drinking and the physiological act of swallowing dog meat during a banquet both function as biological testimonies to spiritual submission, echoing Foucauldian theories of power and subjectivation. Li Wan's "growth", in this context, becomes a systematic erasure of subjectivity.

Cao's innovation lies in his departure from the observational detachment typical of the Sixth Generation, pioneering instead a paradigm of "metaphorical realism"¹⁶⁶ (Bordwell 2007, 45-48). In "Dead End", the intersection of Lacanian mirror theory and the introspective ethical concept of Shendu (vigilance in solitude) is embodied in Xin Xiaofeng's convulsing throat and bulging carotid arteries during an asthma attack—an expression of abstract ethical conflict rendered with visceral corporeality.

Cao's formal experimentation establishes a dialectical tension between genre conventions and auteur expression, structured across three interrelated dimensions. First, in the ethical reconfiguration of narrative structure, "Cock and Bull" employ a multi-chapter circular form to create an ethical laboratory. The audience initially experiences the murder through Song Laoer's perspective, later reevaluates it via Wang Youquan's account, and finally confronts a subversive revelation through Dong Xiaofeng's version. This Rashōmon-like structure destabilizes notions of truth, transforming narrative form into a vehicle for postmodern ethical inquiry. The resultant moral disorientation serves as a critical interrogation of culturally rooted moral values such as *Renyi* (benevolence and righteousness) in the film. Second, in the transmedial integration of audiovisual language, "Dead End" constructs a sophisticated semiotic system through sound design. Police sirens evolve from diegetic ambient noise to psychological symbols of repression in Xin Xiaofeng's dreams, and finally to theological emblems of judgment. In Chen Bijue's suicide scene, the "acoustic collapse"¹⁶⁷ technique—where natural sounds crescendo into a tragic symphony before falling into complete silence at the moment of death—creates an auditory epiphany that elevates sound

¹⁶⁶ The term "metaphorical realism" has been used in contemporary film criticism to describe works that transcend the boundaries of strict realism by injecting allegorical or philosophical weight into realistic narratives (see Zhang, 2004; Pickowicz & Zhang, 2006). In Cao Baoping's work, it marks a departure from the observational minimalism of Sixth Generation Chinese cinema, toward a style that fuses corporeal detail with ethical symbolism (see Berry, 2009; Teo, 2019; McGrath, 2008).

¹⁶⁷ The concept of acoustic collapse refers to the deliberate removal or muting of ambient sound at climactic moments in film, producing a disorienting or transcendent effect. This aligns with Michel Chion's (1994) analysis of silence in *Audio-Vision*, where he discusses how strategic absence of sound can function as a dramatic rupture, forcing viewers to confront emotional or existential crises in heightened sensory isolation.

montage into a philosophical gesture of transcendence and redemption. Third, Cao develops a theory of performance aesthetics based on "embodied philosoph"¹⁶⁸ (Sobchack 2004, 60-83). Li Mi's portrayal in "The Equation of Love and Death" externalizes existential trauma through neurotic gestures, such as fingertip tremors and fragmented recitations of letters memorized over four years. Similarly, Li Wan's forced swallowing and muscle control in "Einstein and Einstein" renders Foucault's theory of "body discipline" at a capillary level, with the suspended teardrop and forced smile encapsulating the aesthetics of disciplinary violence.

Cao Baoping's critical intervention lies in resolving the longstanding "box-office curse"¹⁶⁹ of auteur cinema through three dialectical strategies. First, by intellectually reframing genre elements, he embeds philosophical inquiries within commercially viable frameworks. "Dead End" employs a police procedural narrative while simultaneously probing the ethics of guilt and redemption; Xin Xiaofeng's asthma attack amidst a rainstorm becomes a locus where genre tension and existential contemplation coalesce. Second, by translating culturally specific codes into universally resonant metaphors, Cao broadens the emotional reach of localized narratives. The dog-meat banquet scene in "Einstein and Einstein" is not only a microcosm of Chinese familial discipline but also a powerful commentary on modernity's erosion of individual autonomy. Such scenes allow adolescent trauma within Xi'an's alleyways to resonate across cultural boundaries. Third, Cao strikes a careful balance between industrial and aesthetic demands. In "Cock and Bull", a multi-threaded narrative maintains commercial momentum while facilitating moments of ethical suspension through shifting narrative perspectives. This synergy between auteur expression and audience accessibility demonstrates that artistic integrity and market success need not be mutually exclusive.

His ability to "dance in ideological shackles" has yielded rare dual achievements in Chinese cinema. "Einstein and Einstein" garnered an 8.2 rating on "Douban"¹⁷⁰ along with critical acclaim, while "Dead End" grossed ¥ 304 million CNY¹⁷¹ at the box office—a record for the crime genre. "Cock and Bull" achieved ¥ 136 million CNY through its nonlinear storytelling and darkly humorous Yunnan dialect, nurturing mainstream audiences' capacity for narrative complexity. As Song Laoer searches for truth across Yunnan's mountain roads, Cao simultaneously charts a path for reconciling art and commerce in the Chinese film industry.

Within the broader framework of international cinema, Cao Baoping offers a distinctive "Chinese solution". In contrast to European auteurs' preoccupation with

¹⁶⁸ The concept of "embodied philosophy performance" draws on performance studies and philosophical aesthetics, in which the body becomes the medium for expressing abstract or ideological meaning. This is evident in Cao Baoping's direction of actors like Zhou Xun and Zhang Xueying, where trembling hands, throat constriction, or suppressed tears reflect deeper social and ethical constructs.

¹⁶⁹ It refers to the phenomenon that a movie is widely favored before its release (such as having big-name stars, high investment, popular IP or strong publicity, etc.), but its box office after its release is far below expectations or even a miserable failure.

¹⁷⁰ 豆瓣 It is one of the most influential online film databases, rating platforms and movie fan communities in China, same like IMBD. Its "Douban Rating" is often used as an important indicator to measure film reputation and even affects box office.

¹⁷¹ 人民币 The legal tender of China, issued by the People's Bank of China, it is the only legal currency valid for all transactions throughout the country, used for denomination, settlement, and payment, with the symbol "¥".

metaphysical abstraction, Cao grounds philosophical inquiry in the empirical realities of Chinese life. The “Troublemakers”, for instance, satirizes grassroots political mechanisms through dark humor, with the Xiong brothers' dominion over village elections serving as a microcosmic allegory of China's rural political ecology.

Resisting the homogenizing pressure of Hollywood genres, Cao insists on cultural specificity. In “Cock and Bull”, the Yunnan dialect and “rustic philosophizing”¹⁷² transform a mountain road pursuit into a moving exhibition of regional identity. Unlike the Sixth Generation's tendency toward aestheticized suffering, Cao's films infuse realism with creative illumination. Li Mi's monologue on the overpass in “The Equation of Love and Death” transcends the individual's spiritual drift, elevating it to a universal meditation on human existence.

Cao's creative paradigm thus charts a sustainable path for Chinese auteur cinema—eschewing both derivative imitations of Western cinematographic art and wholesale capitulation to commercial logic. Instead, it proposes a multidimensional equilibrium that integrates local experience, modern cinematic language. As captured in “Dead End”, the iconic interrogation scene—where iron bars fragment dim light to imprison Xin Xiaofeng—the convergence of realist sound design, genre tension, and culturally embedded moral tropes exemplifies Cao's aesthetic reconciliation at the brink of collapse.

His work marks a shift in Chinese auteur cinema towards a phase of “paradigm revolution”¹⁷³. (Kuhn, T. S. 1996, 52-91). His contributions resonate across three interrelated dimensions of cinematic practice. Aesthetically, he pioneers a methodology of “metaphorical realism”¹⁷⁴ (Elsaesser 2005, 58-62) (Zhang 2004, 203-208), transforming social issues into image-symbol systems imbued with philosophical depth—whether in the forced milk-drinking rituals of “Einstein and Einstein” or the rain-soaked manifestations of guilt in “Dead End”. Industrially, he proves that auteur cinema can coexist with market imperatives. The “Dead End” gets commercial success and triple Best Actor win at Shanghai International Film Festival offer a replicable model for the industrial viability of artistic cinema. Culturally, Cao constructs a framework for the modern reinterpretation of traditional Chinese values. His deconstruction of *Renyi* in “Cock and Bull” and Foucauldian reading of discipline in “Einstein and Einstein” breathe new life into ancient moral through cinematic experimentation.

¹⁷² The term “rustic philosophizing” has appeared in film and literary criticism to describe works that articulate philosophical reflection through vernacular realism and rural sensibility (see Wood, 2003; Zhang, 2004). In Chinese film studies, it has been used to interpret the moral simplicity and existential inquiry embedded in rural realism, particularly in post-socialist cinema (see Berry, 2009; Lu, 2007).

¹⁷³ The term paradigm revolution originates from Thomas Kuhn's theory of scientific revolutions, describing periods of transformative change in a discipline's foundational assumptions. Although Kuhn focused on science, the term has since been adapted to describe cultural and artistic transformations, such as shifts in cinematic aesthetics.

¹⁷⁴ The concept of *metaphorical realism* denotes a narrative or aesthetic strategy that embeds symbolic meaning within realist cinematic forms. While not universally codified in film theory, it draws from traditions such as poetic realism and metaphorical narrative practices discussed in Chinese and European auteur cinema. For an exploration of realism's evolution into metaphor-rich aesthetics.

At a time when cinema faces disruption from digital platforms, Cao's trajectory offers an inspiration: authentic authorship resides not in elitist detachment but in narrating chases along Yunnan's dirt roads while engaging in philosophical inquiry through sound and image. This form of power—rooted in reality, yet transcending it—offers a blueprint for safeguarding creative integrity amid shifting industrial tides. It belongs not only to visionary auteurs but to the filmmakers navigating the tensions between tradition and modernity, locality and globality, artistry, and commerce.

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Appendix 1: Filmography of Cao Baoping (Pre-2020)

This appendix chronologically lists the feature films directed by Cao Baoping prior to the year 2020. The information includes international English titles, original Chinese titles, release years, and key cast members.

Table: Cao Baoping's Feature Films (2001-2016)

Release Year	English Title (International)	Chinese Title	Key Cast
2001	<i>Absolute Emotion</i>	《绝对情感》	Gao Yuanyuan, Liu Bin, Zhou Xun
2006	<i>Trouble Makers</i>	《光荣的愤怒》	Wu Gang, Wang Xizhi
2008	<i>The Equation of Love and Death</i>	《李米的猜想》	Zhou Xun, Deng Chao, Zhang Hanyu
2013	<i>Einstein and Einstein</i>	《狗十三》	Zhang Xueying, Guo Jinglin
2015	<i>The Dead End</i>	《烈日灼心》	Deng Chao, Duan Yihong, Guo Tao
2016	<i>"Cock and Bull"</i>	《追凶者也》	Liu Ye, Zhang Yi

Notes:

1. **Chronology:** The list is ordered by theatrical release year. It is worth noting that *Einstein and Einstein* was filmed in 2013 but had its official theatrical release in 2018. For the purpose of tracking the director's creative evolution, its position reflects its production and festival circuit completion date.
2. **Film Selection:** This filmography includes only feature-length films directed by Cao Baoping, excluding his television works, screenwriting-only projects, and producer-only roles.