

Exploring Narrative Expression in Jiang Wen's Films

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Abstract:

As a representative figure of Chinese film author-directors, Jiang Wen's works show highly personalized characteristics in terms of narrative structure, language style and cultural metaphors. This essay takes *In the Heat of the Sun* and *Let the Bullets Fly* as its primary subjects of analysis, exploring the deployment of nonlinear narrative, irony, and absurdity in these films, as well as the distinctive articulation of characterization and visual language. Through a close reading of the text and contextual analysis, the article reveals how Jiang Wen constructs a narrative space with political allegory through metaphor, symbolism and parody in the context of censorship and society, to realize a deeper critique of historical memory, power structure and social reality. This study concludes that Jiang Wen's films not only break through the traditional narrative framework in terms of artistic form but also embody strong ideological tension and critical consciousness in terms of cultural expression, which has important aesthetic value and social significance.

Keywords: Jiang Wen; narrative strategies; visual style.

1. Introduction

In the landscape of contemporary Chinese cinema, Jiang Wen has become one of the most influential auteur-directors whose films combine personal expression with cultural critique. Focusing on *In the Heat of the Sun* and *Let the Bullets Fly*, this study examines how Jiang innovates through nonlinear and inverted narrative structures, distinctive visual styles, and complex characterization, while constructing allegorical spaces that address history, power, and social reality under the constraints of censorship. This research is significant because it not only highlights Jiang's unique auteur identity and his contribution to genre hybridization in Chinese cinema but also

reveals how his films stimulate critical reflection through the integration of postmodern narrative techniques, irony, and political allegory. Methodologically, the study adopts a literature-based analytical approach, synthesizing scholarly research and close textual reading to interpret Jiang's narrative strategies within cultural and social frameworks. The goal is to reveal the core features of Jiang Wen's cinematic authorship and to assess its broader cultural significance.

2. The Overall Narrative Charac-

teristics of Jiang Wen's Films

As a highly individual and influential director in Chinese cinema, Jiang Wen's works present a distinctive protagonist in his narrative style. He is not only a director, but also a writer and an actor. This triple identity allows him to control the audiovisual, narrative and acting aspects of the movie. Therefore, the narrative characteristics of Jiang Wen's films are strongly subjective and highly personal. Jiang Wen's movie narrative style is mainly reflected in the following aspects.

2.1 Highly Metaphorical

Jiang Wen specializes in building complex cultural spaces through the use of metaphors. His films often do not directly express views on politics or society, but rather convey to the audience a critique and reflection on reality through the design of character behavior, scene setting, camera language and lines. For example, in the movie *Let the Bullets Fly*, the setting of Goose Town symbolizes a social system with an intricate power structure. According to Van den Troost, K., the main characters in the movie represent the power structure of different classes in Chinese society—the ruling class, the agents of power, the middle class, and the underclass. Through the struggles of these characters, the movie reveals the social conflicts and class relations [1]. Moreover, the open and covert struggles between the bandit Zhang Mazi and the landlord Huang Silang suggest a contest between folk wisdom and corrupt power. Jiang Wen's dialogue design for the actors is concise and sharp, with both sides engaging in an escalating exchange marked by rapid pacing and intense emotion. Through a microcosmic lens, Jiang vividly exposes the darker facets of human nature to the audience.

2.2 Strong Irony

Satire is also a very characteristic narrative device in Jiang Wen's films. Through exaggerated dialogues, absurd plots and conflicts between characters, he reveals the absurdity and injustice of social reality. Cai, S. argues that absurd comedic plots and characters are more than just means of entertainment; they construct a mirror image that allows the audience to look at typical characters and phenomena of real Chinese society in laughter and spectacle [2]. For example, in the film *Hidden Man*, the Beiping officials shouted the national righteousness, playing the patriotic flag but secretly colluding with corruption; the doctor as a hospital director but mistakenly removed the right kidney of a famous scholar in Beiping, a variety of absurd plot settings and dialogues show Jiang Wen's satire and criticism of society.

2.3 Complex Structure

Jiang Wen's narrative structure often breaks the traditional linear logic and adopts non-linear, inverted and multiple perspectives, making the audience constantly challenged and guided during the viewing process. Yuan Xuehui. argued that the "space" in Jiang Wen's films is not only a physical reproduction of scenes, but also a geographic, visual and cultural symbolic space that transcends reality through exaggeration, illusion and visual impact [3]. For example, the movie *The Sun Also Rises* tells the story of four seemingly independent events: "Madness", "Love", "Gun" and "Dream". which are eventually collaged together as a whole. The first three events took place in different seasons of the same year, while the last one goes back to an earlier starting point. The film's timeline keeps jumping, contributing to the reversal of the order of cause and effect, and ultimately allowing the audience to complete the closure of meaning at the end of the movie. This complex structure not only enhances the artistry of the movie but also increases the audience's sense of participation and depth of thought.

2.4 Authorized Expressions

Jiang Wen, as the creator of the trinity of writing, directing and acting, his personal style is especially evident in his works. He often plays important roles in his films himself. As a child, Jiang moved from place to place with his parents, eventually growing up in an army college in Beijing. This experience has deeply influenced his work in films, such as the role of adult Ma Xiaojun in *In the Heat of Sun*. This "authorship" of the character makes the film's narrative more unified and personalized, and his acting style is highly compatible with the director's concept, which adds tension and depth to the narrative.

This essay will take *In the Heat of the Sun* and *Let the Bullets Fly* as examples to explore Jiang Wen's narrative expression in different themes and historical contexts, and to analyze his similarities and differences and innovations in time structure, characterization, language style and cultural metaphors.

3. Analysis of Works

3.1 Analysis of Narrative Expression in In the Heat of the Sun

In the Heat of the Sun is Jiang Wen's directorial debut, adapted from Wang Shuo's novel *Dong Wu Xiong Meng*. Set in the 1970s and against the backdrop of Jiang Wen's own teenage experiences in an army compound, the film shows the audience a period of youthful restlessness and

emotional confusion intertwined with the experience of growing up.

The movie adopts a non-linear narrative structure, with the adult Ma Xiaojun reminiscing from a first-person perspective. The movie opens with a monologue by the adult Ma Xiaojun on his memories of the past, and then introduces the social conditions of the 1970s, where reality and memory are intertwined. The movie is interspersed with the author's recollections of self-description. The timeline does not advance in a traditional order but rather follows emotional fluctuations and psychological triggers. The movie also shows the rich fantasies of Ma Xiaojun, who is a teenager, influenced by the social background. This non-linear structure not only enhances the subjectivity of the narrative but also allows the audience to constantly switch between reality and memories during the viewing process, experiencing the complex emotions within the characters.

As the main character, Ma Xiaojun's growth process is full of confusion, restlessness and rebellion. He longs to be recognized, but also constantly challenges authority; he pursues love but also falls into emotional confusion. This complex psychological state is presented through Jiang Wen's delicate narrative, making the character both realistic and tense. Wang, X. Z. considers the irrational behavior of Ma Xiaojun is proposed to reveal his subconscious desires (sexual instinct, aggression) and the influence of childhood trauma, reflecting the conflict of Freud's "ego-ego-superego" [4]. He climbs high towers to show his courage to his buddies; he enjoys the fun and tension of picking locks but never steals anything; he likes a girl but can't figure out what she's thinking. Although Ma Xiaojun is a righteous man, he is not a "hero" in the traditional sense; although he picks locks and skips school, he is not a bad boy. Ma Xiaojun is an ordinary teenager struggling in the flood of the times, and his growth trajectory maps out the psychological state of an entire generation, which is exactly what director Jiang Wen wants to convey to the audience.

The movie is full of hazy and sultry visual style. Elements such as sunlight, sweat, streets, and buildings form an urban space that is both familiar and unfamiliar, and the language of the camera is full of poetry and symbolism. Xie, Lu Han. thinks the overall color tone (golden yellow), light (always bright or even overexposed sunlight) and atmosphere of the film have been filtered and embellished by emotional memories, presenting a "sunny" dreamy texture, which constitutes the tone of its youthful aesthetic - nostalgic, warm and romantic [5]. Most parts of the film adopt a stable perspective, bringing the audience a peaceful and quiet visual environment, which in turn contrasts with the youthful restlessness of Ma Xiaojun and his

companions. The inner monologue and the picture composition complement each other by making the narrative not only the advancement of the plot, but also the flow of emotions and the depiction of psychology. In that movie, Jiang Wen also often set up expletives in his lines to build characterization and plot. Teenage protagonist Ma Xiaojun's first line when he appears in the movie is swearing, and in the subsequent episodes Ma Xiaojun often swears with his partners. The profanity design naturally shapes the rebellious image of Ma Xiaojun's adolescence and allows the audience to enter Jiang Wen's memories of his adolescence without even realizing it.

Although the movie does not directly depict the political movement of the Cultural Revolution, it implicitly shows the repression and absurdity of that era through the living conditions and psychological changes of the characters. There is a strong tension between Ma Xiaojun's growth and the context of the times, making the individual's fate closely linked to the historical context and constituting a profound cultural metaphor. Zhou, Yuxue. suggests that the revolutionary songs, excerpts from model operas (e.g., "Chairman Mao's Words" and "The Internationale"), and radio melodies of the Cultural Revolution period, which are used extensively in the film, are not simply background sounds [6]. They are first and foremost "sound specimens" of the era, instantly transporting the audience to that historical context (Beijing in the 1970s), and constructing an aesthetic space that is both authentic and nostalgic. They build a real and nostalgic aesthetic space.

3.2 Analysis of Narrative Expression in *Let the Bullets Fly*

Let the Bullets Fly is a 2010 film directed by Jiang Wen that combines action, comedy and political satire. The movie tells the story of Pocky Zhang, who enters Goose Town under the guise of a magistrate and fights against the local bully, Huang Silang, with ups and downs, full of reversals and irony.

The movie moves in a linear fashion, but the constant reversals and setups in the plot development keep the audience in a constant state of cognitive challenge as they watch. Xu, Haodong. argues that Jiang Wen's film dialogue is characterized by high density and fast pace, creating a sense of oppression through information overload, while fragmented lines reinforce absurdity [7]. The main thread of the movie is Zhang Muzhi's entering Goose Town in the guise of a prefect and fighting with Huang Silang. The subsequent reversals of the fake governor's identity, the governor and the scapegoat, and the corpse of Master Huang all redefine the motivations of the characters and the meaning of the events, making the narrative

not only an advancement of time, but also a reconstruction of perceptions.

Lu Wei. argues that Jiang Wen's film world is not a quest for realism, but an allegorized stage built by a series of landscape symbols [8]. In the world of Goose Town, the confrontation between Pocky Zhang and Huang Silang forms the central tension of the movie. Sedzielarz, A. considers that the paradoxical fusion of "bandit" and "hero" makes Pocky Zhang both a bandit and an embodiment of justice [9]. This dual role of "criminal and hero" reveals how Jiang Wen reconstructs modern Chinese history through black humor and satire. The movie gives moral legitimacy to criminal behavior, and Zhang Mazi, as a "grassroots hero" whose behavior is full of wisdom and sense of justice, is both a hero and a liar. On the one hand, he wants to confront Huang Silang to administer justice; on the other hand, he is a "fake governor" who enters the city with a purpose and uses trickery to gain benefits. In this way, Pocky Zhang appears to be blood, alive and well. On the contrary, Huang Silang symbolizes corruption and manipulation of power. He is ostensibly a refined landlord, but he uses violence, power, and buying off the government to manipulate the people. In the game with Zhang Muzhi, he has the upper hand for a while but ultimately loses because he is overconfident. The dialogues between the two men are full of metaphors and ironies, which both advance the plot and reveal the characters' personalities and social structures. In portraying the character of Zhang Mazi, Jiang Wen gives him both folk wisdom and idealism, forming a complex and fascinating film world.

The film skillfully combines black humor, action elements and political satire to form a unique narrative style. Ran Zhuang. claims that Jiang Wen's films use absurd jokes to deconstruct serious political metaphors and form a post-modern style of irony [10]. Jiang Wen breaks with linear history, blurs the boundaries between good and evil, and presents a profound political allegory through absurd comedy. The comedic elements make the movie entertaining, while the satire and metaphors give it depth of thought. This fusion of styles makes the movie both light-hearted and profound in its narrative expression, both ornamental and critical.

The film builds a symbolic social model through the fictional space of Goose Town. Zhang Mazi's reform and struggle, Huang Silang's manipulation and corruption, as well as the people's silence and awakening, constitute an allegory about people's livelihood, power and justice, and expose the cycle of power and the nature of violence. Jiang Wen expresses his criticism and reflection on real society through the narrative, making the movie not only a story, but also a cultural expression and social reflection.

3.3 Comparative Analysis of the Narrative Similarities and Differences Between the Two Films

As shown in Table 1, The two films have their own characteristics in terms of narrative structure, perspective, language style and cultural metaphors, reflecting Jiang Wen's narrative strategies and artistic pursuits under different themes.

Table 1. Two films comparing

Dimension	In the Heat of The Sun	Let the Bullets Fly
Time Structure	Non-linear, memories intertwine with reality	Linear advancement, multiple reversals to enhance tension
Narrative perspective	First person, subjective	Third person, group interaction and event-driven plot development
Linguistic Style	Poetic, introspective, emotional flow	Ironic, witty, and logical
Cultural Metaphor	The conflict between youth and the times, a metaphor for individual growth	Power Structures and Symbols of Social Criticism

4. The Significance and Influence of Jiang Wen's Narrative Expressions

Jiang Wen's narrative expression not only breaks the narrative convention of traditional movies in form, but also profoundly reveals the tension between the individual and the society at the ideological level and effectively stimulates the audience's reflection and critical consciousness.

The significance and impact of Jiang Wen's narrative expression will be discussed from the following three dimensions.

4.1 Innovation and Impact on the Traditional Narrative of Chinese Cinema

Jiang Wen's films have maximally challenged the traditional Chinese cinema's linear and single perspective

based narrative model. Through the non-linear structure of reminiscence, *In the Heat of the Sun* mirrors the past and reality, breaking the inertia of one-way flow of time; *Let the Bullets Fly* inserts reversals and repetitive arguments into the seemingly linear plot, making the narrative progressive and full of uncertainty. The juxtaposition of these two distinct narrative strategies in the same directorial vein demonstrates Jiang Wen's own constant exploration of narrative boundaries. In addition, Jiang Wen's triple identity of director, screenwriter, and starring actor is integrated, making the film's narrative highly authorialized. He seamlessly switches between behind the scenes and in front of the stage, not only controlling the rhythm of the narrative on a macro level but also penetrating the characters' words and deeds on a micro level. This „being there“ approach makes the narrative expression more integrated and also brings about a qualitative change in the traditional teamwork-based narrative chain, pushing the narrative of Chinese cinema in a new direction that is more personalized and experimental.

4.2 Expressing Individual and Social Influences and Tensions

The most appealing aspect of Jiang Wen's films is that he reveals the complex entanglement between personal destiny and the context of the times through his narrative structure and characterization. In *In the Heat of the Sun*, Ma Xiaojun is both a microcosm of individual youth and the Cultural Revolution and the carrier of collective memories. His confusion and rebellion map the spiritual dilemma of an era. In *Let the Bullets Fly*, although Zhang Mazi is in the dystopian „Goose Town“, he always represents the spirit of the grassroots against the rich and powerful, and every scheme or subversion of his is a powerful interrogation of the social power system. With the fast and slow pace of narrative and the nodes of plot reversal, Jiang Wen precisely presents the tension between individual and collective, ideal and reality, justice and corruption. The non-linear recollection highlights the subjective experience of the individual, while linear reversal emphasizes the multiple contradictions of the social structure. These two narrative modes complement each other, enabling the viewer to feel the emotional temperature of the characters as well as gain insight into the logic of power in the functioning of society.

4.3 Inspiration of the Audience to Think about Society

Beyond entertainment, Jiang Wen's narrative greatly stimulates the audience's critical consciousness and desire for reflection. Through metaphor and irony, white space and

reversal, he skillfully leaves space for reflection to the audience. *In the Heat of the Sun* does not provide the audience with an emotional outlet, but through the fracture and reorganization of memory fragments, allows people to piece together the truth of that era; *Let the Bullets Fly* does not directly give the answer to the question of good and evil, but in the witty dialogue and plot reversal, guides the audience to constantly question „who is the justice“ and „what is the truth?“ Instead, it guides the audience to constantly question „who is righteous“ and „what is the truth“ through witty dialogues and plot twists.

This open-ended narrative design not only enhances the sense of participation in viewing the movie but also makes the movie itself a field of social discourse. The discussions about history, power, and morality often continue to fester after the movie is screened. Jiang Wen himself does not rigidly instill a certain point of view on screen but utilizes the polysemy of the narrative structure to guide the audience to think about the essential relationship between the individual and the system, between memory and reality, amidst laughter and surprise. Through the multi-dimensional analysis of Jiang Wen's narrative expression, what he has brought about is not only a formal innovation in the narrative of Chinese cinema, but also a far-reaching and long-lasting impact on the audience and the film itself at the ideological level.

5. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the narrative structure, visual style, and characterization in Jiang Wen's representative works *In the Heat of the Sun* and *Let the Bullets Fly*, and reveals the core features of his cinema: his films exhibit a distinct auteur identity that combines entertainment with critique, often employing nonlinear and inverted narrative structures as well as allegorical and absurdist techniques to explore the tension between history and reality. The characters in the movie tend to exhibit morally ambiguous, good and evil qualities. For example, Zhang Mazi, a bandit and a hero, embodies grassroots justice and implies a subversion of the social order, thus reflecting a deeper reflection on power and corruption and popular identity. It also implies a subversion of the social order, thus reflecting a deeper reflection on power, corruption and the identity of the people. This research indicates that Jiang Wen's creations not only demonstrate innovation in narrative strategies and visual style but also open a pathway for conveying political allegories indirectly within the context of film censorship in China. His works represent both an assertion of personal style and an important attempt in contemporary Chinese cinema at genre hybridization and cultural critique. By integrating postmodern narrative

techniques, dark humor, and social allegory, his films possess significant discursive value in both academic and popular contexts.

This study also has its limitations: the scope of analysis is confined to two representative works and has not yet provided comprehensive coverage of Jiang Wen's entire oeuvre. Future research could incorporate a broader range of film texts, supplemented with empirical materials on audience reception and industrial context, and draw on perspectives such as psychoanalysis, gender studies, or postcolonial theory to further deepen the understanding of Jiang Wen's cinematic art and its cultural significance.

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