

Study on Poetic Narrative in the Chinese Poetry Art Film "Kaili Blues"

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Abstract. The evolution of Chinese cinema has witnessed the emergence of innovative narrative forms, exemplified by Bi Gan's "Kaili Blues." Released in 2015, this film captivated audiences with its rich poetic imagery and innovative storytelling techniques. This research explores the poetic narrative employed in "Kaili Blues," aiming to elucidate its artistic significance within the context of contemporary Chinese filmmaking. Through a comprehensive analysis of the film's narrative style, visual expression, and emotional resonance, this study delves into how poetic storytelling transcends traditional narrative conventions, blurring the boundaries between dreams and reality. The examination reveals that "Kaili Blues" utilizes a poetic narrative characterized by the attenuation of dramatic conflicts, the portrayal of objective phenomena in life, and the use of metaphorical spatial constructions. Moreover, the study uncovers a distinct difference in the "epic sense" between Chinese poetic narrative and European and former Soviet poetic cinema, highlighting the film's unique contribution to the global cinematic landscape. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the aesthetic sensibilities of contemporary Chinese cinema and its broader implications for cinematic storytelling worldwide.

Keywords: Poetic Narrative, Art Film, Poetry, Bi Gan, "Kaili Blues".

1. Introduction

"Kaili Blues" marks the first feature-length film by young Chinese filmmaker Bi Gan. The film follows the journey of a rural man from Kaili who embarks on a quest to find his nephew in a strange town. Blurring the boundaries between past and future, the narrative unfolds as the protagonist reunites with his wife in a realm infused with new magical realism. Reflecting the creator's thoughts and viewpoints, the film deconstructs conventional linear storytelling. Through the protagonist's slow recitations of emotionally charged poetry, the narrative transitions, creating an extra-diegetic space where poetry serves as both third-person narration and first-person account. Time undergoes reversals and jumps, achieving narrative temporal arbitrariness [1].

"Kaili Blues" premiered in Sweden on August 11, 2015, followed by its mainland China release on July 15, 2016, grossing 6.47 million RMB. The film garnered accolades such as Best New Director and the FIPRESCI Prize at the 52nd Golden Horse Awards, as well as international recognition including Best Film from Three Continents at the Festival des 3 Continents in Nantes and Best New Director and Special Mention for Best First Feature Film at the Locarno Film Festival. Director Bi Gan was also honored with the Young Director of the Year award from the China Film Directors' Guild in 2015, and the JURY GRAND PRIZE at the 2016 Asia Pacific Screen Awards (APSA) [2].

In this study, the term "poetic narrative" is adopted to explore how narrative techniques can skillfully express the creator's inner thoughts. "Poetic storytelling" transcends traditional storytelling by emphasizing emotional depth and thematic complexity over intricate plot components. Unlike conventional narratives, "poetic storytelling" blurs the boundaries between dreams and reality, employing experimental long shots and metaphors to convey surreal poetic imagery [3]. This narrative approach allows the director's thoughts and emotions to shape the story, offering viewers an immersive cinematic experience.

Through an examination of its narrative style, visual expression, and emotional resonance, this study aims to contribute to the understanding of poetic narrative in Chinese cinema and its unique creative allure.

2. Literature Review

In Viktor Shklovsky's contribution to the 1927 Formalist anthology "Film Poetics," he distinguished between "poetry" and "prose" in cinema, characterizing poetry as "larger geometric structures" and prose as "pop... technical and formal features exceeding semantic features." In other words, in cinematic "poetry," the overall structure of the film is not based on plot or character development but rather on film elements such as framing, lighting, color, sound, and camera movement [4].

The concept of "poetic cinema" is widely discussed in the realm of film criticism, particularly regarding its meanings and interpretations across different periods. Essentially, it embodies two main ideas: one is that "poetic" signifies an inherent quality of art, and the other implies a form of expression that transcends the boundaries of reality, characterized by elevation from the real world and connected to the realm of poetry [5]. This duality of meaning has evolved over time, especially within the context of cinematic history. Exploring these shifts in meaning provides valuable insights into the nature of "poetic narration" and its relationship with artistic expression.

The shaping of time and space constitutes an emerging research focus in the realm of poetic cinema. At the beginning of the 20th century, "time" emerged as a topic of significant interest, prompting relentless exploration across scientific, philosophical, and literary domains. There exists a notable correlation between Bi Gan's film "Kaili Blues" and the works of Soviet director Andrei Tarkovsky, manifested in their sculpting of dreams and creation of poetic imagery. Tarkovsky emphasized the director's essential task as "sculpting time," with films like "Mirror" and "Ivan's Childhood" renowned for their rich poetic styles, emphasizing cinematic truth over realism. He described the "poetic" tendency as "not follow[ing] strict narrative development and logical connections" and not "looking for justifications for the protagonist's actions": instead of appealing to the intellect, cinema "must above all be emotional and act on the heart" [6].

Deleuze, in his book "Cinema II: The Time-Image," introduced the theory of "time-image," emphasizing the presentation of time in film. The indiscernible loop merging reality and subjectivity represents the smallest cycle, with Tarkovsky's films considered exemplars of "crystal-image," containing the past, present, and future simultaneously, highlighting the "threefold synthesis of time" [7].

In the realm of Chinese cinema, Bi Gan's filmmaking inherits Tarkovsky's explorative spirit and shares a certain association with Deleuze's theory [8]. "Kaili Blues" is replete with poetic temporal imagery, employing a narrative style akin to literature, rather than relying solely on moving images. Bi Gan stated in an interview with "Thirteen Invitations" that memory and time are the primary driving forces behind his film creation. In "Kaili Blues," pure audiovisual imagery is not merely extended through action but needs to be captured, aligning with Tarkovsky's creative philosophy. Bi Gan frequently employs off-screen narration in his films, creating a uniquely personal visual style [9].

In "Cinema of Poetry," Italian director Pasolini points out that film language possesses both dreamlike and objectifying qualities, suggesting it is an irrational tool [10]. Consequently, he indicates a departure from traditional narrative modes and advocates for the free "flow" as a creative expression. Poetic cinema, according to Pasolini, shifts away from strict narrative development and logical connections, instead focusing on capturing transient and wondrous moments in life, emphasizing the expression of emotions and sensations. In these films, the camera no longer delves into characters' psychological states but rather situates them within the background, highlighting the environment and objects. These objects, carefully composed, become the focal point of the shot, rather than the characters themselves. Consequently, the camera in the film does not focus on the characters' inner worlds but presents a materialistic perspective, emphasizing the significance of the environment surrounding the characters.

Pasolini likens this concept to the free indirect discourse found in novels, describing a method where the author immerses themselves in the thoughts of a character. This approach involves not only depicting the character's psychological state but also employing their language. In contrast to direct quotation (or what Pasolini terms as "shooting the viewpoint"), free indirect subjectivity emphasizes

the character's subjectivity, allowing the film to be influenced by the character's emotions rather than the author's excessive intervention [6].

This method allows the film to manifest what Pasolini terms as the "other film," where characters can fully and freely express themselves, even without explicit reasons. Pasolini believed that this technique liberated cinema from the constraints of traditional narrative modes, providing a level of visual communication that is almost pre-linguistic and pre-morphological in nature. Thus, free indirect subjectivity becomes a means of achieving "poetic narration".

In the study of the poetic narrative form in "Kaili Blues," the expression cannot be separated from "poetry" and "literature." "Poetic narrative" is characterized by the attenuation of dramatic conflicts, the portrayal of objective phenomena in life, and the use of metaphorical spatial constructions, demonstrating the interactive relationship between poetry and cinema. Analyzing the poetic narrative of "Kaili Blues" reveals a distinct difference in the "epic sense" between Chinese poetic narrative and European and former Soviet poetic cinema.

3. Methodology

The research utilized content analysis to uncover the film's poetic storytelling components. The goal was to decipher and comprehend the core of poetic storytelling by methodically analyzing diverse elements such as topics, nuances of emotions, story frameworks, stylistic methods, and how dreams merge with actuality. This technique facilitated an in-depth exploration of the story's complexities, revealing various strata of significance and symbolism which add to its poetic impact. The analysis offered an understanding of the filmmaker's use of movie-like elements to create a story that transcends traditional storytelling, ensuring a profound and engaging experience with the audience. The study emphasized the dynamic between themes, visual representations, and emotional impact, seeking to illustrate how the movie conveys its artistic charm and core messages with efficacy.

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to delve into the complexity of poetic narration in 'Kaili Blues'. This method is chosen because it is suitable for exploring the subjective aspects of film production, such as narrative techniques, visual expression, and emotional communication. Qualitative analysis allows for a meticulous examination of the artistic elements of the film, aiding in a deeper understanding of its aesthetics and thematic significance. Primary data sources include the film 'Kaili Blues' itself, film reviews, academic articles, as well as interviews or statements from the director, Bi Gan. These sources provide different perspectives and insights into the narrative style, visual imagery, and themes of the film. Additionally, secondary data from film theory, poetic narration, and Chinese film academic literature will complement the analysis, enriching the theoretical framework of the study.

Data analysis involves various methods, including text analysis, visual analysis, and thematic analysis. Text analysis focuses on dissecting the screenplay, dialogue, and narrative structure of a film to identify instances of poetic narrative techniques, such as metaphorical language, symbolism, and nonlinear storytelling. Visual analysis requires careful examination of the cinematography, set design, and editing of a film to elucidate how visual elements contribute to poetic aesthetics and narrative coherence. Thematic analysis entails identifying recurring themes, motifs, and philosophical underpinnings in the narrative, revealing the deeper meanings and implications of the film.

4. Results

First and foremost, "Kaili Blues" employs first-person poetic narration to convey the feelings of characters within a limited narrative space, thereby enhancing the emotional depth necessary for a "poetic narrative" to unfold. Furthermore, the film skillfully utilizes alternating narrative perspectives, with the camera following the subjects and oscillating between subjective and objective viewpoints.

For instance, when the protagonist embarks on a leisurely motorcycle ride with Weiwei to enjoy noodles together, the narrative tension is deliberately subdued, achieving a poetic aesthetic through a

relaxed storytelling approach. This deliberate alternation of narrative perspectives and the reversal of chronological sequence imbue the film with a distinctive expressive power, offering viewers a more emotionally resonant experience akin to recollecting memories.

Moreover, "Kaili Blues" employs long takes to capture imagery and mood, contributing to the thematic resonance of the poetic narration by ensuring continuity in expression. The unique narrative space, characterized by the blank spaces filled with highly distinctive Chinese aesthetic imagery, further elevates the film's significance amidst numerous art films. This characteristic lends "Kaili Blues" a profound and exceptional quality that merits in-depth study and analysis.

5. Discussion

In terms of narrative style, poetry serves as the most crucial vehicle in this film. On the train, Chen Sheng is half-dreaming. He disembarks during the journey and walks towards another track, as if foreshadowing his entry into another world. These poems serve both as the narrator's storytelling and hint at emotional and temporal changes. The recitation of poetry accompanies his dreams, making the narrative time and space more blurred, while the use of dialect subtly narrows the distance between the film and the audience, immersing viewers in an emotional labyrinth.

The shifting narrative perspectives are also a unique feature of "Kaili Blues." In the film's storytelling, the guide is both the narrator within the story and seemingly the director himself. The story's development does not rely solely on the characters' perspectives but rather constructs the entire film's space and chronology through the director's viewpoint. Audiences are guided into the protagonist's inner world, experiencing the passage of time and the fluctuations of emotions. In "Kaili Blues," the camera follows the protagonist's actions, capturing the changes in his inner world, while the audience becomes spectators, delving deep into the protagonist's emotional landscape. This alternating narrative perspective allows viewers not only to feel the authenticity of emotions but also to gain insight into the characters' true feelings.

In terms of visual representation, the film world of Carey Blues relies heavily on a long lens as an indispensable narrative tool, allowing the director to create an immersive, poetic storytelling experience. Through uninterrupted extended sequences, 'Kaili Blues' captures the passage of time and the fluidity of reality in a captivating and evocative manner.

The director believes that long takes are crucial for capturing the elusive essence of time and creating a sense of temporal continuity in storytelling. By reverting to the most primitive state of film shots and avoiding traditional editing techniques, the film fosters a sense of realism and immediacy. Through the design of subjective long takes and directorial scene management, the shots maintain a continuous flow of action. This segment lasts for 42 minutes, encompassing scenes of wheat swaying through rivers, thunderstorms, savages, poetry, Jasmine, and a plethora of elements imbued with magical realism through the lens of the long take. This approach aligns more with people's memories of dreams, making time and space fluid and authentic while maintaining a cohesive narrative.

In terms of emotional conveyance, symbolic imagery and atmosphere play a pivotal role in the film "Kaili Blues," serving as a visual language to convey deeper themes and emotions. Through continuous camera shots, the director also utilizes various symbols to indicate the passage of time. For example, in a 13-minute-long scene, the protagonist Chen Sheng, upon being released from prison, drives along a mountain road. However, the camera does not focus directly on the protagonist but instead lingers within the mountain mist, leaving both the audience and the protagonist with only a vague view of the blurry road, evoking a profound sense of "white space" typical of Chinese aesthetics. The blurred imagery ignites the viewers' sense of exploration, leaving ample room for contemplation. At this moment, the protagonist slowly begins to narrate his story, calmly recounting the loss of his mother, wife, and his brother's wayward path. The ambiance of the thin mist transcends mere scenery, becoming a bridge for emotional resonance between the characters and the audience. Through the interplay of mist design and poetic language, time almost stands still, shifting the perspective towards the protagonist's feelings, and allowing the transmission of emotions of sorrow and confusion.

The doctor in Kaili corresponds to the tailor in Dangmai. Yangyang plans to become a tour guide in Kaili and separate from her lover. Meanwhile, a Kaili-brand sewing machine is placed in the doctor's house. Similarly, Wewei is passionate about clocks, and his clock designs can be found on the walls of his home. These details ultimately lead the protagonist and the audience to realize that Wewei in Dangmai is the protagonist's nephew, hinting at a sense of temporal dislocation and recurrence.

Overall, the film cleverly crafts a poetic narrative structure through its narrative perspective, visual expression, and skillful use of symbolic imagery, conveying the passage of time and the development of the story's emotions.

6. Conclusion

The research on "Kaili Blues" has revealed its poetic narrative structure, exploring its narrative perspectives, visual expressions, and symbolic imagery. The film employs diverse perspectives to convey the director's intentions, with poetic storytelling conveying the feelings of characters, blurring the boundaries between dreams and reality. The alternating narrative perspectives, combined with the skillful use of symbolic imagery, create a rich and emotionally resonant viewing experience for the audience. Through the use of long takes and metaphorical spatial structures, the film shapes a unique poetic aesthetic that transcends traditional narrative conventions.

"Kaili Blues" embodies the evolving landscape of Chinese cinema, showcasing innovative narrative techniques and artistic sensibilities. Its contribution to the realm of poetic cinema extends beyond narrative and visual elements, offering viewers a glimpse into the complexity of human emotions and the passage of time. As the film continues to receive international acclaim, it underscores the importance of exploring diverse narrative forms and pushing the boundaries of cinematic expression. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of poetic narrative in Chinese cinema and its broader impact on global cinematic storytelling. By dissecting the elements of "Kaili Blues," it provides valuable insights into the artistic significance of poetic storytelling and its influence on contemporary filmmaking.

In conclusion, "Kaili Blues" demonstrates the power of poetic narrative in captivating audiences, conveying profound themes and emotions. As Chinese cinema evolves, films like "Kaili Blues" serve as beacons of artistic innovation and creative exploration, inspiring future generations of filmmakers to push the boundaries of storytelling and visual expression.

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