

The Dissolution of Mirroring and the Reconstruction of the Self: A Study of Mirror Writing in the Film *Xiaoyan and Wu Aili*

Shi Tang

Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua 321000, China

Abstract: The film *Xiaoyan and Wu Aili* constructs multiple layers of parallelism across narrative structure, character configuration, and audiovisual expression through a dense deployment of mirror writing, which functions as a key mechanism for the production of textual meaning in both creation and reception. This study argues that the relational structure embedded in mirroring generates a compelling textual complexity, while localized dislocations within these mirror structures disrupt audience expectations. At the same time, character-based mirroring carries and refracts the protagonist's traumatic memory. Through these three interrelated functions, the film subtly and restrainedly deconstructs themes such as patriarchy, morality, and trauma, thereby demonstrating a distinctive depth of thematic exploration and artistic expression.

Keywords: Mirror Writing, Audience Expectation, Traumatic Memory, Interpellation.

1. Introduction

In the film *Xiaoyan and Wu Aili*, mirroring functions as a central motif that shapes both content and form. It operates across multiple levels of the film, including narrative structure, character relations, mise-en-scène, and thematic expression, forming a series of meaningful parallels. In this paper, "mirroring" is understood beyond the mirror theory of Jacques Lacan. It refers to a broader narrative strategy that brings past and present events into a shared space and generates internal tension through contrast and shifting perspectives.^[2] Based on this understanding, this paper examines the multiple constructions of mirroring in the film and explores its role as a method, as a mechanism that guides and disrupts audience expectation, and as a means of self-reflection through which textual meaning is produced.

2. Multiple Forms of Mirroring in the Text

The most prominent mirroring relationship in the film is constructed through the deliberate arrangement of narrative structure and perspective. The film adopts a dual narrative strategy, in which two storylines develop in parallel, intersect, and eventually converge, depicting the protagonist Xiaoyan's life before and after leaving home. At the beginning, due to the temporal and spatial differences between the two lines, together with Xiaoyan's changes in name (Allie and Wu Aili), hairstyle, and clothing, as well as the restricted scope of each narrative line, viewers are likely to interpret the two figures as separate individuals. At the outset, viewers are likely to misrecognize the identity of the characters in a way reminiscent of *Love Letter*. The two figures connected by mirroring are initially taken to be two different girls with similar appearances inhabiting parallel narrative spaces. However, as the narrative progresses, the boundary between the two identities becomes increasingly blurred, and under the accumulation of suspense, they gradually overlap. At this stage, the mirroring relationship shifts from a contrast between self and other to a relation within the self, that is,

between the present and the future self, or between the present and the past self.

The film's construction of this mirroring relationship is immediately effective. The segmented structure of "Xiaoyan, Allie, and Wu Aili" further reinforces this mirroring and guides viewers to perceive them in opposition. As two versions of the self before and after leaving home, Xiaoyan and Allie display markedly different characteristics. Xiaoyan, who has just been released from prison, is often dressed in dark clothing, appears withdrawn, and frequently engages in conflicts with others. In contrast, Allie, after leaving home, is consistently dressed in white and presents a gentle and composed image. Their responses to trauma are also clearly divided. Xiaoyan reacts in a sensitive and intense manner, confronting her memories, her father whom she killed, and her mother who repeats past patterns. By contrast, Allie turns inward and engages in a process of self-reflection through acting exercises that emphasize authenticity. This mirroring relationship thus presents two different ways of responding to trauma and traces Xiaoyan's development from guilt, shame, and anger toward self-reconciliation.

In addition, the dual narrative structure itself forms a mirroring relationship within the plot and establishes an intertextual relation in which the same theme is articulated across different contexts. The question of truth and falsehood runs through both narrative lines. It first appears in the acting class as a guiding principle, expressed in the statement that performance may be false, but inner emotion must be genuine. In the other narrative line, this statement is continuously tested in real-life situations. For example, Xiaoyan lies in order to secure a job, while her mother, Wu Aili, struggles with whether to continue her dishonest business practices. The acting exercise of performing smiles in the classroom and the moral dilemmas in everyday life form a mirroring relationship between performance and reality. Through this contrast, the film develops a sense of complexity and ambiguity around the theme.

In the film, cinematography and mise-en-scène also contribute to the construction of mirroring. Mirror imagery appears frequently, including both solitary reflections and

shots in which two characters are framed together in the mirror, suggesting different types of mirroring relationships. A further example appears in the cycling scenes, which are rendered through matching shot scale and mirrored composition. In an extreme long shot, the electric bicycle travels from the eastern side of the field to the western side, and later in the opposite direction. In the vertically aligned convex traffic mirrors, Xiaoyan carries Xiaowei as they enter from the upper mirror and exit through the lower one. Dialogue scenes are also consistently composed with visual imbalance, placing characters at the right edge of the frame while leaving the left half conspicuously empty. This deliberate visual arrangement foregrounds the formal design of the image and reinforces the film's mirroring structure.

Among the many examples, the subjective shot of Xiaoyan on the staircase of the barbershop is particularly striking. Within a static long shot, the customers and barbers inside the shop appear cheerful and relaxed, creating a bright atmosphere that contrasts sharply with Xiaoyan's distressed condition. Through this perceptual subjective shot, Xiaoyan projects an imagined version of her ideal self onto the people inside the shop. This mirroring structure does not fully emerge at once. It is only in the later part of the film, when Xiaoyan enters the barbershop for a haircut and becomes one of the customers, that this earlier visual suggestion is confirmed at the narrative level.

Through the combination of multiple mirroring structures, *Xiaoyan and Wu Aili* can be seen as a prism-like system in which the narrative unfolds. Within this structure, the film extends beyond its apparent boundaries and opens up diverse emotional and interpretive possibilities. Some forms of mirroring are simultaneous, such as the co-presence of two faces within a mirror image. Others require viewers to actively connect different narrative segments or even different temporal and spatial contexts in order to recognize the relationship. As a result, the text develops a compelling complexity and a strong potential for interpretation and reinterpretation.

3. The Frustration of Mirrored Expectations

The pervasive use of mirroring in the film gradually transforms it from a rhetorical device into a dominant structuring principle of the work. As viewers become accustomed to this recurring formal pattern, they begin to develop expectations about how the film will unfold. As David Bordwell observes, repeated exposure to formal patterns shapes the viewer's anticipation of subsequent developments.^[1] A related tendency can also be understood through Gestalt psychology, which emphasizes the human inclination toward perceptual wholeness. In this context, mirroring in *Xiaoyan and Wu Aili* functions not only as a formal strategy, but also as a system that produces a sense of coherence. Its inherently multiple structure nevertheless appears unified, making the emergence of audience expectations around mirroring not incidental but structurally conditioned.

Within this seemingly inevitable formation of expectation, the film generates moments of misalignment within its mirroring structures. Rather than producing the familiar contrasts typically associated with mirroring, these moments point instead to a breakdown of contrast itself. The effect is akin to a deflated balloon, as the viewer's expectation of

formal coherence collapses. At the same time, this emergence of irregularity from an otherwise ordered system of mirroring constitutes one of the film's most distinctive expressive qualities, often inviting deeper reflection from the viewer.

In the film, the relationship between Xiaoyan and her mother, Wu Aili, constitutes one of the most striking instances of mirroring. Before the eruption of their conflict, their faces appear together in the bedroom mirror, positioned in visual symmetry. Their subsequent argument unfolds around the idea of having lost everything because of one another, extending this mirroring into the level of language. The narrative line of Allie renders this mother-daughter mirroring even more explicit, from Xiaoyan's adoption of her mother's name as an alias to her direct address to the mirror, in which she declares her hatred toward Wu Aili. Meanwhile, the mother quietly observes her daughter's reflection through the narrow opening of a classroom door.

Within this seemingly stable mirroring relationship, the romantic storylines of the mother and daughter diverge from the mirrored structure. In contrast to the relatively complete portrayal of the mother's romantic life, the daughter's remains indistinct, only briefly suggested as a possibility. It does not develop into a dramatic convergence, nor does it sustain a clear comparative relation. This narrative choice does not reduce Azheng to a merely functional role, although other figures, such as Ziwei and the police officer, serve more evidently instrumental purposes. Rather, it works to foreground the emotional bond between Xiaoyan and her mother, making mutual understanding conceivable. In this sense, the film implicitly offers an internal justification for the mother's repeated misjudgments in relationships. It suggests the possibility that affection may exist beyond pity or other forms of moralized sentiment, and that love can coexist with violence and harm. From this perspective, although the film presents a deeply painful narrative of trauma through a subdued visual tone, it nonetheless preserves a certain simplicity, revealing an underlying sense of optimism.

A second instance of misaligned mirroring emerges in the relationship between Xiaoyan and her half-brother Xiaowei. The film develops this sibling mirroring to an almost saturated degree, across visual composition, mise-en-scène, and narrative structure, and thus requires little further elaboration here.

This mirroring appears to reach its peak when Xiaowei stabs Renge, who is in the act of committing violence, with a shard of glass, echoing Xiaoyan's earlier act of killing her father to protect her mother. The two moments are strikingly similar. Yet, at this point, the mirroring is better understood as a kind of illusion that operates at the level of plot rather than character. This is rooted in the fundamental nature of their relationships. Renge is not Xiaowei's father, and the image of the father that Xiaowei holds is one of dignity and remembrance. Although Xiaowei has formed a bond with Wu Aili that resembles a mother-son relationship, the absence of a paternal role and the presence of an idealized father figure mean that his action can only be interpreted in terms of justice, rather than the complex emotional entanglement underlying Xiaoyan's act of patricide. As a result, the mirroring between the siblings extends only to the point of rescuing the mother and then comes to an abrupt end. Once the motivation of the characters is taken into account, the mirroring relation effectively dissolves. It is precisely this illusory quality of mirroring that renders Xiaoyan's earlier act more comprehensible, prompting the viewer to reassess the

mirroring structure. In doing so, the frustration of expectation gives way almost immediately to a form of moral reconciliation aligned with the protagonist's own trajectory.

It must be acknowledged that these localized misalignments within the film's mirroring structures may not stem from a fully conscious artistic intention, nor will they be equally perceptible to all viewers. Nevertheless, they are clearly manifested both in the formal organization of the text and in the psychology of spectatorship. More importantly, the two instances of misalignment discussed above converge in expressing a consistent creative stance, which reflects a lenient approach to moral judgment, a sense of empathy toward the protagonist, and a sustained commitment to the fragile ideal of what has been lost.

4. Breaking the Mirror: A Path to Self-Reconstruction

In the film, mirroring assumes multiple functions. It is not an overstatement to suggest that the core mechanism of the film's visual and narrative operation is realized through mirroring. It is evident that the various character-based mirroring relations all center on Xiaoyan, including Allie, her mother Wu Aili, Xiaowei, and Li Yawen, all of whom are positioned around the same traumatic event and are, positioned in corresponding mirrored positions around Xiaoyan. Within this structure, the protagonist's task may be understood as an attempt to escape from a space enclosed by mirrors on all sides. The film's distinctiveness lies in the way it imagines this escape. Rather than relying on the figures within the mirror or on incidental openings, it encourages the protagonist to break the mirroring structure from within and to carve out her own path.

Xiaoyan's repeated encounters with traumatic memory are activated through a fourfold structure of interpellation mediated by mirroring. Interpellation, in general terms, refers to the process by which ideology addresses the individual and constitutes them as a subject. Žižek further develops this concept as a mode of subject formation through which an external Other enables the re-experiencing of past events.^[3] After her release from prison, Xiaoyan instinctively resists recalling the past and often avoids speaking about it, a tendency reflected in subtle details such as her evasive response when failing to find the chili sauce. It is precisely the sameness within these mirrored relations that calls forth her traumatic memory and compels her to confront it. Across these four mirrored relations, this shared structure consistently points toward different forms of loss: the loss of moral judgment and rationality in relation to Allie, the loss of love and family in relation to her mother, the loss of a father in relation to Xiaowei, and the loss of self in relation to Li Yawen. Within these different mirrored dimensions, Xiaoyan is forced to engage with distinct aspects of her trauma and to shift her perspective, ultimately re-examining both the father she once perceived as monstrous and the self who was forced into becoming a "monster".

With the resurfacing of traumatic memory, Xiaoyan finds herself repeatedly drawn into situations that echo those of the four mirrored others, marked by a recurrent pattern of

repetition. For instance, her decision to care for Xiaowei leads her to experience a maternal role, while her departure after a fierce argument with her mother recalls Li Yawen's earlier act of leaving. In this sense, mirroring appears to offer Xiaoyan a possible path out of trauma, yet at the same time demands that she break away from it. Rather than remaining within the structure of repetition, she is compelled to seek answers within herself and to develop difference within mirroring. This takes the form of rebuilding an ordinary life, working steadily, living properly, and, most importantly, achieving reconciliation with herself. The film reaches an emotional climax in Xiaoyan's confession while dressed in mourning attire. By the end, when she retrieves her mother from the police station and reconciles with her, their nighttime conversation subtly signals the reconstruction of her subjectivity. She chooses to take up a job in Kaohsiung rather than remain in the family store as her mother wishes, lives in a dormitory while still maintaining ties with home, accepts the responsibility of caring for Xiaowei, and remains open to the possibility of a future relationship.

It can thus be argued that the film ultimately frames the breaking of mirroring as the resolution to the acceptance of trauma, elevating the self from an object of experience to the level of method. Rather than understanding this simply as a method of breaking mirroring, it may be more appropriate, in a deliberately extended sense, to describe it as taking the self as method.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has examined the multiple forms of mirroring in *Xiaoyan and Wu Aili* across narrative structure, audiovisual design, and thematic articulation. It argues that mirroring, whether manifested through its multidimensional construction, its occasional misalignments, or its role in shaping the protagonist's trajectory of growth, constitutes a central aesthetic and structural principle of the film. By placing a young woman's fragile sense of self alongside larger forces such as patriarchy, family origin, morality, and law, the film engages with complex and often intense issues through a restrained and highly individualized mode of expression. In doing so, it offers a distinctive approach that combines formal innovation with a sustained humanistic concern.

Acknowledgments

The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial support from National Training Program of Innovation and Entrepreneurship for Undergraduates (202410345014).

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