

The Aesthetic Characteristics of Open Ending in Chinese Cinema

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Abstract: The “open ending”, as opposed to the conventional “closed ending”, is an adventure at the narrative level of a piece of art and clearly possesses postmodern traits and aesthetic tendencies. Since the turn of the century, open endings have been employed increasingly frequently in Chinese films, and numerous noteworthy classic examples have surfaced. The aesthetic characteristics of open ending in Chinese films can be summarised as follows: Firstly, the wonder of defamiliarization: the open ending can bring the feeling of astonishment (thaumazein) and the effect of alienation; Secondly, the fun of interaction: the open ending highlights the status of the audience and can strengthen the fun of interaction; Thirdly, the realm of blank-leaving: through the negative space of the story, the open ending creates an artistic conception that makes people endless aftertaste.

1. Introduction

As the last section of narrative works in theater, literature, and film, the ending serves to enhance the thematic meaning, release the audience's emotions, and explain the characters' fates. For this reason, how the ending is handled is very crucial for narrative works. In general, the ending's responsibility is to resolve the mystery and satisfy the emotion. But there's still a sort of conclusion that “most of the questions raised by the telling are answered, but an unanswered question or two may trail out of the film, leaving the audience to supply it subsequent to the viewing. Most of the emotion evoked by the film will be satisfied, but an emotional residue may be left for the audience to satisfy.” [1] Robert McKee calls this type of ending “open ending” as opposed to the conventional “closed ending”.

The open ending exhibits clear postmodern characteristics and aesthetic inclinations, characterized by a pursuing of language and desire that negates any pursuit of causality and certainty, as well as an attack on any pursuit of teleology and deterministic ideals. While it may not be possible to claim that open endings originated with postmodern thinking in the West after the 1950s and 1960s, open endings have become a symptom of postmodernist literature since the subversion of conventional closed endings gained popularity, supporting Jean Ricardou's observation that “the classic novel is the story of an adventure; the modern novel is the adventure of the story.” [2]

Open endings have been employed in several highly acclaimed films throughout the history of

film, including *The Bicycle Thieves*, *The Graduate*, and *A Distant Cry from Spring*. Their endings are memorable and thought-provoking and serve as the movie's icing on the cake. In the twenty-first century, as well as the country's shifting socioeconomic landscape and widening aesthetic tastes, open endings have been progressively incorporated into Chinese films, including *The Story of Qiu Ju*, *Unknown Pleasures*, *Platform*, and *And the Spring Comes*. In recent years, open endings have been used more frequently in Chinese films, such as *Shadow*, *Pegasus*, *Sister* and *Deep Sea*, etc., which has become a familiar and enjoyable topic for the public. Even while open endings are increasingly becoming a popular aesthetic, academic circles continue to pay little attention to them. Based on the current circumstances, this study distills the aesthetic qualities of Chinese films' open endings into the wonder of defamiliarization, the fun of interaction, and the realm of blank-leaving.

2. The wonder of defamiliarization: Open ending brings astonishment feelings and alienation effects

In ancient Greece, Aristotle put forward concepts such as "surprise," "amazement," and "wonder" in *Poetics*, stating that "These effects occur above all when things come about contrary to expectation but because of one another. This will be more astonishing than if they come about spontaneously or by chance" [3], thereby establishing the foundation of human aesthetic perception of "astonishment" (thaumazein). It was not until modern times that "defamiliarization" became established as an aesthetic category, first introduced by Viktor Shklovsky, a representative figure of Russian formalist aesthetics, in his *Art as technique*. According to Shklovsky, "The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged." [4] In video narratives, "unfamiliar" implies a deformation of the classical narrative form, i.e. a transcendence of the conventional narrative discourse. In terms of narrative presentation, the unfamiliar video text shows an "aesthetic distance" from the original text [5], thereby producing the "alienation effect" advocated by the German dramatist Bertolt Brecht. According to Bertolt Brecht, "what appealed most to us in any episode was its strangeness and incomprehensibility" [6]. In other words, it involves transforming "familiar" things into "unfamiliar" forms to provoke shock and inspire rational thinking.

The difference between the "closed ending" and the "open ending" lies in the difference between familiar and unfamiliar. Closed endings conclude the story in a complete and clear manner, where all the mysteries and the characters' fates are revealed as a matter of course, providing the audience with a sense of familiarity and pleasure without requiring further reflection. The open ending either concludes abruptly and leaves the audience to complete the story or presents multiple meanings to stimulate thought, in the aesthetic process, by changing the familiar structures to increase the complexity of understanding and prolong the aesthetic time, which initially astonishes the audience and then realizes the responsibility of art as stated by Bertolt Brecht: to prompt the audience to think rationally and to wake up and understand the world in which they are living.

There are two key psychological mechanisms in the film-viewing process: narrative anticipation and emotional projection. Narrative anticipation is based on the audience's cultural background and experience with film genres and narrative structures, forming an internal prediction of the possible direction of the story. Meanwhile, the psychology of emotional projection enables viewers to substitute their own emotions into the characters and plot of films, immersing them in the narrative and stimulating their curiosity about the story's direction. Therefore, through the interaction of narrative anticipation and emotional projection, viewers unconsciously construct their understanding of the plot and predict the ending in the process of watching films. Due to the dominance of the traditional storytelling model, some films intentionally use the open-ending

structure, which makes the audience's anticipation subverted and creates the effect of astonishment.

Zhang Yimou's *Shadow* is a powerful story about a substitute, known as "Shadow" in the film. The turbulent situation and the indistinguishable "Shadow" add to the suspense of the film. The ending serves as the climax of *Shadow*, in which there are many twists and turns. Firstly, the real Ziyu, disguises as an assassin, waits for an opportunity to kill King Pei. However, he is killed by his "Shadow", Jingzhou, when attempting to assassinate him, and then the "Shadow" walks out of the grand hall and replaces the real body to become the new Ziyu. After the dust settles, Miss Ai, who has witnessed everything, screams and rushes towards the door of the courtroom, looking out through the doorway with a horrified look on her face. Just as the audience's anticipation is aroused once again and wonders what kind of scene might unfold beyond the door, the film abruptly ends in an unexpected manner, leaving behind an intriguing open ending. At this moment, the astonishment in the viewer's mind caused by the failure of expectations is more intense and lasting than the shock brought by any possible ending.

Following the astonishment, there is the alienation effect brought by the relatively unfamiliar narrative structure of the open endings. Unlike the immersive experience created by "familiarity", defamiliarized image constantly reminds the audience of the real space they are in and the activities they are engaged in, prompting them to think objectively as observers. This effect is especially evident in films that address real-world issues. *Sister* is a film that blends the "family ethical narrative" and the "family healing narrative", in which the creators intend to touch upon the traditional concept of "gender bias against women" and the intense family conflicts it triggers. The film revolves around the question of whether a sister who has lost her parents should raise her younger brother. Faced with this dilemma, the ending of the film neither aggressively lets sister walk away, nor uses a "happy ending" to dissolve the profoundness of social issues, but in an open form for the audience to reflect and discuss, perhaps it's difficult for arts to show the way out of complex social issues, but let more people "see" is also the significance of films.

3. The fun of interaction: Open ending highlights audience status and interactive interests

In the late 1960s, Hans Robert Jauss introduced the concept of "Reception Aesthetics", which had a profound impact and significantly enhanced the status of "readers" in the study and appreciation of literature. According to Jauss, "The historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participation of its addressees." [7] The active and interactive nature of the reception process is emphasised. Film psychology research in the 20th century confirms that reception aesthetics is also applicable to the field of film. As a more interactive art form, the dissemination and acceptance of film and television works involve a complex process of active participation, "the audience's brain is like a set of advanced radar system with modern computer functions, which needs to constantly accept every signal, evaluate and process all of them, either use them immediately or store them for backup, thus forming a two-way relationship of mutual influence between the newly accepted information and the pre-stored known schema." [8] Therefore, the process of audience viewing is also a guessing game for thinking collision with the director and screenwriter. A plot and structure that are too bland will be difficult to arouse the interest of the audience, and vice versa, it exceeds the general audience's ability to think. The open ending is the presentation of the creator after fully considering the interaction between the subject and object of aesthetics, which can encourage audience engagement, spark ideas and comments, and complete the creation together in the interaction.

Open endings, as opposed to closed endings, offer the audience additional plot possibilities and greater room for independent thought. Some of these films do not fully disclose the ending, leaving the audience to complete the story based on the preceding plot direction and their own logic and

experience. The film *Only the River Flows*, adapted from Yu Hua's novel, exhibits significant postmodern characteristics. Its ambiguous and uncertain open ending provides ample room for the audience's imagination and interpretation. At the end of the film, the protagonist Ma Zhe solves the case that happened by the river and earns third-class merit, then returns to his family, living a happy life with his wife, and even his greatest concern—the birth of his child—goes smoothly and healthily. However, compared to the depressing and confusing emotions that dominate the film, the perfect ending of the moment seems so unreal. While puzzled, some viewers recall the film's many hints that Ma Zhe may have mental health issues. These details collectively imply that the happy ending might be nothing more than a fantasy in the mind of the psychopath Ma Zhe. The dual-layered ending divides the audience into different types, and as the labyrinthine structure of the film is unravelled, it feels as though the creator and the viewer are engaged in a puzzle-solving game, which is full of fun and lingering.

The interaction between a film and its audience does not end with the end of the text, and good cinema will provoke enduring discussions. Films with open endings often spark extensive discussion among audiences after their release due to the uncertainty of their endings. In the current Web 3.0 era, users can freely participate in the Internet and complete interactions, making the discussion around a popular film become a norm, and the audience continues to experience the delight of watching the film through the continuous discussion activities. At this time, the communication between the director and the audience is also more open, and sometimes the director's opinions will become an addition to the film's uncertain content. *Pegasus* is a 2019 Chinese New Year's Eve inspirational comedy film about Zhang Chi, a former racing driver who is now living a downtrodden life and decides to return to motorsports with his former partner to reclaim the glory of the past. At the end of the film, Zhang Chi, while winning the championship and setting a new record, loses his brakes and dashes off the cliffs of the Bayanbulak race course with his car. The scene is frozen in the air, majestic, shocking, and gorgeous, depicting the heroism of ordinary people. The open ending prompts significant debate among the audience about whether the main character lives or dies. In response to the audience's thoughts and questions, director Han Han released his feelings about the film's ending on his Weibo: "There is no sea in Bayanbulak; heroes never die," which pushes the discussion to a higher climax. However, as the director himself said, "Everyone has their own understanding of the ending, so please trust yourself." The uncertainty and the thousand faces of the open ending are precisely what it's all about.

In recent years, the introduction and development of interactive cinema have provided fresh samples for the creation and research of open endings. Interactive cinema is a kind of "interactive" art mediated by moving images that combines the "interactivity" of video games and the audiovisual representation of traditional films, thus merging the experiences and identities of game players and film viewers into one. [9] In interactive cinema, there are typically numerous possible endings, and the audience's choices will affect the direction of the subsequent plot, thus leading to varied endings, so the endings are often open-ended. At present, the number of domestic interactive cinemas is still relatively small, with representative works including *The Invisible Guardian* in 19 years, *Underdog Detective* in 22 years, and *Breakout13* in 23 years, etc. Taking the latest phenomenal interactive movie *Breakout 13* as an example, the audience will play the role of 18-year-old rebellious adolescent Zhang Yang, who fights with the evil founder of the correction centre. There are eight endings, including "Final Fantasy""The Last Roar""Learning to be Grateful", and so on, which are triggered by the audience's various choices and actions, and each of them has its own unique plot and ending scene. Compared with traditional film and television works, interactive movie change appreciation into participation, allowing the audience to arrive at the corresponding endings in the choice and to have more fun in the interaction.

4. The realm of blank-leaving: Open ending creates negative spaces and artistic conceptions

Blank-leaving is one of the significant theories of traditional Chinese aesthetics, originating from the concept of “origin and end create each other” in Taoist philosophy, and exemplifies the artistic aesthetics of the interplay between reality and illusion. Blank-leaving initially emerged in the compositional concept of “white as black” in the art of Chinese painting and subsequently expanded to encompass poetry, literature, music, dance, architecture, theatre, film, television and other artistic domains. At the same time, the concept of blank-leaving is in the same vein as the theory of artistic conceptions, and traditional Chinese aesthetics posits that the judicious application of negative spaces can evoke boundless artistic conceptions. Xie He, a Southern Dynasty painter, put forward the famous assertion of “Vivid Charm” in his “Ancient Chinese painting and calligraphy (Guhua Pinlu)”, combining “Vitality” and “Rhyme” for the first time. He believed that “Vivid Charm” was the first of painting and that “Vitality” was found not only in the concrete objects but also in the emptiness outside the objects, without which there would be no “Vivid Charm” and the work of art would be devoid of life. Art work has no vitality, no emptiness, Chinese poetry, painting artistic conceptions cannot be produced. [10] It is clear that if we want to make the “Being” part of the work interesting and memorable, we have to spend effort on the “Nothingness” part of the work, which is the same as the “expectation-horizon”, “calling structure”, and the principle of “Gestalt” in the western, reflecting the commonality of human beings in the pursuit of aesthetics.

Traditional Chinese aesthetic theories have inspired the creation of directors and the aesthetics of audiences in diverse ways, just as the double-stage system of Western classical painting influenced Western film studies, leading to the deduction of the classic “suture theory”. The films of directors such as Kar-wai Wong, Edward Yang, and Jia Zhangke are filled with strong oriental aesthetic colours, and the technique of blank-leaving is widely used in audio-visual performance, story structure, time and space treatment, and character dialogues, creating a meaningful aesthetic context that implicitly and timelessly conveys the theme of the film and leaves an unforgettable imaginative space for the viewers to savour in their hearts. The approach of not telling the entire tale and allowing the audience to join in the association is a kind of blank-leaving at the story level, which is utilized at the end of the film to create an open ending.

Jia Zhangke’s films have the beauty of blank-leaving and are presented in an open stance rather than with conclusive ends. He believes that life and destiny are full of chance and uncertainty, therefore open endings have a sense of record and authenticity similar to real life, and poetic meaning emerges at the end, which is difficult to grasp, resulting in an artistic conception that originates from life but is higher than life. For example, the early “Hometown Trilogy” has an open ending. At the end of the film *Pickpocket*, police officer Hao Youliang handcuffs Xiaowu to an electric pole, and Xiaowu crouches down in shame, surrounded by bystanders who come to watch the fun. The film came to a sudden conclusion in the hustle and bustle of the crowd, the audience with the pickpocket Xiaowu, the same as his fate under the flood of the times, no way to know, unable to grasp. At the end of the film *Platform*, the scene is set in the banal moments of daily life, with Cui Mingliang leaning on the sofa to sleep and Yin Ruijuan holding her child and putting him to sleep. The teenage players of the Fenyang County Cultural Troupe, once full of dreams, finally compromise and return to the ordinary. There is no ending to life, and this is what the characters will experience every day of their lives. The film ends at this point with an open ending that is just right, and there is no need to show the mediocre life in the future. *Unknown Pleasure* is the final chapter of the “Hometown Trilogy”. At the end of the film, Binbin sings a song in the police station: “Floating with the wind, Anywhere...” The spectators still have no idea what the adolescents’ future holds, all they know is that they will continue to be lost on the path of confusion. Looking at Jia Zhangke’s films, one can deeply feel the intertwining of the traditional aesthetics of blank-leaving

and the current post-modernity, and ultimately, through the form of an open ending, the audience is presented with the helplessness, confusion, and thinking of a generation of Chinese youth.

In recent years, Chinese animated films have also employed the technique of using open endings to create negative spaces and artistic conceptions. Since its birth in the 1920s, Chinese animated films have been trying to create inventive approaches that reflect their own national characteristics. After nearly a century of creation and exploration, Chinese animated films have recently demonstrated a new trend of vigorous development, resulting in a number of animation works with both Chinese aesthetic styles and profound moral meanings, such as *Big Fish & Begonia*, *Monkey King: Hero is Back* and *Deep Sea*. Traditional Chinese aesthetics are inherited not only in their form but also in spirit. The film *Deep Sea*, which depicts the dream and psychological world of a depressed young girl, shows the traditional aesthetic character of euphemism and subtlety, and the extensive use of the blank-leaving technique during the film's creation adds to the artistic conception and flavour of the story, leaving the audience with infinite room for reminiscence and reverie. In addition to the blank-leaving in the screen composition and the characters' emotions, the open ending of the story exemplifies negative space in narrative structure. At the end of the film, the young girl who has gone through a unique life journey finally decides to overcome her emotions. The struggling girl wakes up with a start on the hospital bed, and this is the end of the film, followed by an illustrated egg that signals a better life to come, and at the end of the egg, the young girl travels to the hometown of Captain, a man who has a meaning to her in terms of salvation, and Captain's smile appears in the sky. Is this girl completely recovered from her depression? Are those beautiful images genuine, or are they just dreams that come true again and again? The ending of the film does not provide a definitive explanation, but it leaves the audience in a bright and melancholic mood that will be memorable for a long time.

5. Conclusions

Along with the changes in China's social environment and the diversification of aesthetic orientations, the frequent usage of open endings has become a remarkable phenomenon in the world of film and television production. To a certain extent, the usage of open endings contributes to enhance the artistic and aesthetic value of the film, brings astonishment feelings and alienation effects, increases the degree of interaction and fun, and creates an infinite realm by leaving negative spaces. At the same time, we should be wary of using open endings to follow the trend, only in this manner can the narrative serve the integrity of the work and provide the audience with better film and television works.

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