

# The Narrative Record of the Ditch

Zhiyi Yin

Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong, China  
melinda1995@qq.com

**ABSTRACT.** The film “the Ditch” is a documentary film adapted by director Bing Wang based on the novel “Farewell to Jiabian Ditch” by writer Xianhui Yang. The film was nominated for the Golden Lion Award at the Venice Film Festival in 2010 and this film is classical to express the narrative of misery because the film use unique narrative methods. This study of the film analyze the film’s narrative expectations and the narrative time from the perspective of narratology carefully. Even though the argument is still weak, it still shows the narrative characteristics of the film.

**KEYWORDS:** Narrative, Narrative time, Misery narration

## 1. Introduction

The theme and expression of misery are always the motif of many writers and the sources of many directors' adaptations. For example, director Yimou Zhang adapted the movie of the same name from Geling Yan 's “The Flowers Of War”, director Weining Mao adapted the movie of the same name from Yao Lu's “Ordinary World” and so on. Comparing with the works of the above-mentioned directors, Bing Wang's “the Ditch” is obviously marginalized. However, this film shows good characteristic and style in terms of narrative and realistic expression, so it is worth to explore.

## 2. The Record and Narrative Expectation of “the Ditch”

Wang Bing spent six years preparing to shoot “The Ditch”. He established the script and narrative framework in 2004, and interviewed more than 100 people from 2005 to 2007. He said: “The important reason for spending so much energy on this film is that this story explains a basic relationship between existence and life relationship and the relationship between people and society in Chinese society from 1949 to 1978.”[1]

The film is the art of adding the director’s own life experience and understanding into the film and expressing it through the selection of materials and secondary creation, “any development model will make the audience have specific expectations” [2].The plot scene in the first few minutes of the film has already made the audience have expectation to the film:Desert with no borders under the sunset,young people who were “expelled” by the farm steward were walking into the “deserted den” with their bags.

The dialogue between them implied that the movie might tell something in a documentary way. Then, when the director asked the process of digging the trench, someone said, “One-third of the people can't move.” The audience probably know that this is not just a simple documentary film, but a documentary film full of misery and hunger. The audience can't help being curious about the following plots: what kind of story would happen? What are the differences between this film and previous realistic films?

Plot is narrative to “tell the specific part of the story.”[3] Bing Wang himself believes that “this film is the first to directly describe the treatment of the rightists in modern Chinese political history and their encounters in labor camps.This topic is still taboo.”

Everything that happens in Jiabian Ditch is related to hunger.

Because of hunger, they had to grow food in the desert. Because of hunger, the rightists ate indigestible seeds and were even swollen to death. Because of hunger, once elegant intellectuals squatted next to the vomiting patient, picking up the incompletely digested lumps to eat. Because of hunger, people who once had status killed the rats and then cooked them with hot water. Because of hunger, the living people cooked the internal organs of the dead people’s corpses and digged out the meat from the corpses to satisfy their hunger.

For living people, this is an extremely painful and primitive experience. In Jiabian Ditch, living is the greatest wish, or many people never hold hope to live.

The environment was so bad that the leaders on the site beautified the reality of lack of food as “socialist construction has encountered short-term difficulties.” So the leader asked people at the ditch to combine work and rest, not to go to work to avoid too many starving deaths. However, the rightists have to find food for themselves to solve the hunger problem.

Bing Wang focused on the story of “Shanghai Women” in Yang Xianhui’s “Farewell to Jiabian Ditch”. Before coming to Jiabian Ditch, Jianyi Dong was a doctor in Shanghai and came to Lanzhou in response to the call to support the Northwest. He refused to eat “dirty” things in Jiabian Ditch, in the end, there was only one way to die. His death was unremarkable, but his death seemed unusual because of his wife.

His wife came to Jiabian Ditch from Shanghai every month to bring him food. But this month, when his wife went to Jiabian Ditch, only news of her husband’s death was waiting. Judging from her dressing, his wife was a decent person. Hearing the news of her husband’s death, after a brief silence, the decent woman subverted decent image to broken look and heart-piercing cry. After a little calm, she distributed the food she brought to her husband to other workers who were starving. That woman must have collapsed in her heart.

After this story, the plot tends to be flat: many people still died every day, but the general situation gradually improved and the rightists were sent back to their hometowns one after another. Only Old Chen was left by the field director to continue sticking to the Desert. In the end of the movie, as Old Chen slowly laying in the deserted den, the film stopped abruptly. No one knows the ending of Old Chen because this is a typical ending of neorealism movie: “Do not provide an answer way out to the audience.”[4]

### 3. The Realism and Narrative Time of the Ditch

Andre Bazin once proposed three truths about the evolution of film language: “The reality of the performance object, the reality of space and time, and the reality of the narrative structure.”[5] Neorealism films emphasize the care of social reality and maintain close contact with reality. It is “a true representation of time and space.”[6] Bing Wang inherited the shooting tradition of neorealism movies, using a large number of long-lens shooting techniques in the film, natural light, natural scenes, scene sounds instead of soundtracks.

Many neo-realistic films adopt this shooting style. For example, the movie *Salesman* filmed by the director Asghar Farhadi and the movie *Blackboards* directed by Samira Makhmalbaf, all films have no background music, but natural sounds, speak slowly, to show the deepest suffering to the audience and to give the audience a feeling of reverberation. Besides, these can trigger the audiences’ infinite thinking.

The core of the long shot is the core of the “real”.[7] During the shooting, Bing Wang always made the camera play the role of a bystander, as much as possible to restore the truth, no narration, no comment. The most classic long shot is that the “Shanghai woman” was stunned, shocked when she heard the death of her husband. From dumbfounded-shocked-suddenly crying-roaring and crushed crying. The scene completely restored the process of the collapse of the protagonist’s inner psychological construction.

The director did not use background music to render the atmosphere, nor did he use over-processed images to show the characters’ hearts. At this time, the slightly shaking hand-cranked camera calmly records all from a bystander’s perspective which closed to the truth and history, calmly presented an extreme misery event to the audience. Misery are no longer heroism, nor the hymn of tragedy, but return to its original appearance, is “a kind of history or misery memory about history”.[8]

To present this kind of suffering memory must make the audience have a real experience, rather than beautify this kind of suffering into sublime and divine.

Film art is an art that combines time and space. At the beginning of the film, only subtitles were used to let the audience know that the story took place in October 1960, but the following statement about time was not clear. Only the rising of the sun and the setting of the west to hint the time were passing such as “second day” and “tomorrow”. When a rightist asked someone to write a letter, the date of inscription was “November 15, 1960.” Let’s just assume that all the plots occurred between October and November 1960.

The story line has always been developed linearly, so the audience can more easily grasp the truly story that took place from October to November 1960. Such a narrative arrangement without montage is also an important way of expressing the truth of the film. As the Shanghai woman failed to find her husband for the first time, she shouted at the scene, “Aren’t you hurting the truth!”, The film culminates. This way of expression is very common in movies, such as the movie *Two Legged Horse*. In that movie, a woman who wrapped her body in black gauze reveals uncoordinated red

high heels in the background of the yellow desert. The woman walked up the steps step by step slowly and then entered the house, this scene showing that some kind of transaction that was not on the table was taking place.

The audience's narrative expectations about the film at beginning of the movie have been satisfied one by one. Besides, the pictures continued to stimulate the audiences' psychological and physical feeling. Such a real vision, "must be self-reflection and questioning"[9] , to achieve the effect of expressing the real misery.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Record and treat all of this calmly from the perspective of a bystander. There are no accusations, no condemnations, no complaints, only statements, to restore as much as possible and present "true" as completely as possible.

As Nietzsche said: "Art treats fantasy as fantasy. So it does not want to deceive. It is true." [10] This is just the way to respect history by narrating suffering directly.

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