

# The creation of literary and artistic temperament in genre movies: A brief analysis of the movie "Hidden Blade"

Gao Jialiang

*School of Humanities, Tiangong University, Tianjin, China*

**Abstract:** *This study focuses on director Cheng Er's film Hidden Blade as a case study to explore the innovative integration of genre cinema and artistic aesthetics. Functioning as an auteur work within the spy genre framework, the film subverts conventional genre formulas through its non-linear temporal collage narrative, achieving equilibrium between suspense construction and humanistic portrayal. The director employs metaphorical montage and symbolic details (particularly the multi-layered "canine" imagery and lamb symbolism) to construct literary expressions while infusing poetic aesthetics into violent sequences. The work preserves quintessential spy genre elements while intensifying psychological depth through fragmented narration and visual ellipsis, thereby establishing a dialectical interplay between commercial appeal and artistic pursuit. Such genre hybridity not only expands the expressive dimensions of espionage cinema but also demonstrates survival strategies for auteur films within contemporary film industries, ultimately proposing an aesthetic breakthrough paradigm for genre filmmaking.*

**Keywords:** "Hidden Blade"; Cheng Er; genre film; literary film; author film

## 1. Introduction

With the film industry reaching a high level of maturity and the film system being well-established, commercial films have emerged as the dominant genre in contemporary cinema. Genre films now dominate the majority of theater screenings. In the current era of popular culture and widespread consumption, audiences gravitate towards films that are fast-paced, engaging, and feature skilled performances by actors. Consequently, the popularity of genre films is readily apparent. However, as the number of genre films continues to rise, the film industry undergoes gradual refinement and advancement. While genre films may captivate audiences with their straightforward and appealing narratives, their formulaic plot structures and stereotypical character portrayals can lead to a sense of predictability, monotony, and audience fatigue. This is often manifested in viewers being able to anticipate the story's conclusion and characters' traits after only a fraction of the film has unfolded. transformation when they see half or one-third of the plot. Some genre films even know the story as soon as they see the name. Therefore, in such an environment, genre films have developed, and some movies with mixed sub-genres and genres have appeared. The so-called genre mix is the combination and combination of multiple genres, that is, there are multiple elements and themes in a movie<sup>[1]</sup>. At the same time, there is a relatively new form, namely literary genre films or genre art films. This style of films appropriately combines the elements and characteristics of art films and genre films, combines the characteristics of the two, presenting a sense of style fusion, and has a different feeling in aesthetic acceptance.

## 2. The mutual combination of genre films and literary films

The film "Hidden Blade" seamlessly blends elements of literature and genre, embodying a longstanding tradition within Chinese cinema. Spy war films have played a crucial role in the evolution of Chinese genre cinema, remaining a prominent and enduring genre. Over time, Chinese spy films have transitioned from their origins as anti-espionage narratives to commercially successful genre films. These films typically adhere to a structured narrative pattern involving the discovery of spy activities, infiltration, reconnaissance, and counter-reconnaissance operations. Although various elements such as love, era, and friendship have gradually been integrated into it in the development of genre creation, forming a juxtaposition of multiple clues, the sequence of causal events formed around the progress of

the fate of the positive protagonist is still the most important structural method<sup>[2]</sup>. With the development of commercial films, the important element of suspense, a spy film, has been raised to the height of narrative structure, the clues of characters are more complex and diverse, the plot conflict points are denser, and the pace is getting faster and faster.

The film "Hidden Blade" presents a distinct departure from conventional espionage war movies by skillfully blending elements of genre cinema with artistry. Director Cheng Er, known for his inclination towards art cinema, has consistently demonstrated a preference for artistic endeavors in his works, ranging from "Virgo Criminals" to his debut feature "The Third Man," "The Death of Romantic," and his latest film "The Hidden Blade." Cheng Er's cinematic style transcends mere commercialism, evident in his narrative structures, visual aesthetics, and overall filmic sensibilities, which underscore his deep-seated yearning for artistic expression. Despite making concessions to the commercial genre in "Hidden Blade," Cheng Er actively engaged in promotional activities prior to its release, including online live broadcasts, press conferences, and premieres, positioning the film as a "highly commercial" venture. By leveraging media amplification strategies, Cheng Er sought to broaden the film's reach and appeal, thereby enhancing its commercial viability. "Hidden Blade" exemplifies the distinctive characteristics and style of literary and artistic films. The movie adheres to the stylistic traits typical of this genre, such as visual aesthetics, narrative structure, and cinematographic language. For instance, it employs a narrative approach that diverges from conventional genre films to convey its storyline.

"The Unknown" is not a purely literary or artistic film. Its storyline is rooted in the genre of spy movies. The cast includes seasoned actors alongside emerging talents, ensuring both a strong performance and appeal to popular culture. This aligns with the market-driven nature of genre films. Director Cheng Er actively promoted the film within the consumer economy, labeling it as a "super commercial film." Examining the film "Hidden Blade," often labeled as a "super commercial film," reveals, as Cheng Er himself articulated, that super commercial films can be perceived as a unique cinematic ideal for creators within the contemporary business landscape. As Cheng Er himself said: "More commercial than business and more artistic than art, is an ideal for a movie that can be fought for<sup>[3]</sup>."

### **3. Artistic expression of the movie "Hidden Blade"**

The limitations of Western "art films" are mainly three aspects: the first is the support of the corresponding system; the second is the style has a certain artistic pursuit and humanistic depth, and has the characteristics of an 'author' movie; the third is the independence of financing channels and distribution channels, which is different from the Hollywood studio system<sup>[4]</sup>. Therefore, from this perspective, the movie "Hidden Blade" is a film with artistic pursuit and profound humanistic depth. In a sense, "Hidden Blade" can be called a literary and artistic author film with a clear imprint.

#### **3.1. Inconsistent narrative model**

Genre films exhibit a programmed and structured narrative, adhering to specific rules and patterns. For instance, spy movies typically follow a storyline progression involving stages such as "discovering spies - infiltrating - reconnaissance and counter-reconnaissance - being discovered - falling into trouble - turning danger into safety." This linear and predictable nature allows audiences to easily comprehend and anticipate the unfolding plot. In contrast, the narrative structure of literary and artistic films lacks coherence. The focus shifts away from linear storyline progression and causal relationships between narrative contradictions and events. Instead of interconnected events, these films present a narrative style characterized by a casual approach to time and space, seemingly devoid of logic, resulting in an incoherent and nonlinear storytelling model. Sometimes the storyline is inserted into so-called scenes that have no connection with the structure and cannot have any actual function of the narrative development - extra characters or scenes<sup>[5]</sup>.

The film "Hidden Blade" is characterized as a spy thriller, yet the director, Cheng Er, has deliberately disrupted its linear narrative structure. Cheng Er employs an inconsistent and fragmented narrative approach. The film depicts the espionage activities and rivalries among Various political parties, the Wang Puppet Government spies, the Japanese Watanabe, and other intelligence agencies during the 1930s and 1940s. Despite an underlying chronological progression evident throughout the film, with temporal cues provided through subtitles marking significant shifts in narrative time—from the fall of Guangzhou in 1938 to three months after Japan's defeat in 1945, and subsequently to Mr. Ye's sanctuary in Hong Kong in 1946—the storytelling and plot narration are deliberately disrupted.

The director opts for a non-linear arrangement, disrupting the chronological flow of the story and plot presentation for the audience.

The film "Hidden Blade" is classified as a spy thriller, however, director Cheng Er intentionally subverts its linear narrative structure. Cheng Er adopts an erratic and disjointed narrative style. The movie delves into the world of espionage, exploring the intricate web of espionage activities and rivalries involving Various political parties, the Wang Puppet Government spies, the Japanese Watanabe, and various other intelligence agencies during the tumultuous period of the 1930s and 1940s. While an overall chronological progression is discernible in the film, with temporal markers such as subtitles indicating significant shifts in narrative time—from the fall of Guangzhou in 1938 to three months post Japan's defeat in 1945, and then to Mr. Ye's refuge in Hong Kong in 1946—the director deliberately disrupts the storytelling. Cheng Er chooses a non-linear narrative structure, disrupting the linear flow of the plot and narrative presentation to engage the audience.

This narrative structure is predominantly observed in literary and artistic cinema, characterized by a non-linear arrangement of space and time that mirrors the fragmented yet interconnected nature of real life. Such an open-ended narrative style mirrors the ambiguous motives and objectives of the protagonists in literary and artistic films. These films often prioritize delving into the inner worlds and psychological dynamics of characters over interpersonal conflicts. For instance, in the film "Hidden Blade," despite its espionage theme, viewers may perceive a relatively loose pacing throughout the movie. The film maintains a consistent rhythm as it unfolds various scenes involving characters like Mr. Ye, Mr. He, and Watanabe, focusing on individual character storylines with minimal inter-character confrontations. The complex structure and constantly switching perspectives are a challenge to the audience, and it is also a painstaking sincerity<sup>[6]</sup>. Although there was a confrontation in the end and there were typical scenes of violent and bloody genre films, the whole movie mainly portrays everyone's choices and difficult-to-control fate in the context of the times, and carefully shows their psychological activities.

Of course, as a genre film, it is an important task to attract audiences into the plot. This kind of outdated time and space can increase the suspense of the plot and story, and the delay of suspense becomes a process for the audience to look forward to, find and piece together the truth, and this process also allows the audience to continue to deepen and participate in it.

### ***3.2. Artistic use of metaphorical details***

Details are very important to movies and are also an indispensable part of literary and artistic movies. Details can also be called symbols. Good details are good symbols. They have their own unique value in the movie and have important value and significance for the narrative of the story and the emotional setting.

The movie "Hidden Blade" has many details, and the director is very hard-working in displaying details. If you watch carefully in the film, you can have an important detail, namely "dog". There are three types of dogs in the movie, namely the desolate dog in the war, the dog fighting with the Japanese army, and the vicious dog in the Wang Puppet tribe. These three types of dogs are not just details, but also symbols and metaphors. The characteristics of "dogs" reflect their owners and their living environment. "Dogs in the fire of war" reflect the living conditions of ordinary citizens who were destroyed by the war; "Dogs following Japan" show that Japan was in the dominance at the beginning of the war, but the dog's outfit indirectly highlights the funny image of the Japanese army's arrogance and arrogance; "The brutal dogs of the Wang Puppet Division" reflect the cunning and collusion of the Japanese government, which only lead to the cruel traitors against the Chinese people. The details of this "dog" image are not only very cinematic, but also very literary. This metaphor and contrast are well used to express the literary and artistic expression of the film technique.

In addition, the detailed metaphor of the film is also reflected in the editing of the shot and the use of montage. The use of montage is not only a means of narrative stories in the movie, but also a means of expressing emotions and expressing emotions in the movie. In the movie "Hidden Blade", when the Japanese army massacred villagers in the village, the camera suddenly edited a lamb. The lamb appeared in the Japanese army's vision. The use of this detailed montage sets the atmosphere. The lamb is the slaughtered villagers, and the villagers are the "lambs to be slaughtered". In the end, the lamb also became the Japanese army's dinner. The use of this metaphorical montage is very clever, and while creating emotions, it explains the relationship and gives the audience a deeper thinking. Another thing is that when Guangzhou fell, the Japanese army bombarded Guangzhou, and the people all When he

escaped to the air-raid shelter, there was a ruin on the ground, and it started to rain heavily. The Japanese planes were still patrolling the sky. At this time, the camera edited a disabled, stained dog. The dog crawled hard in the ruins. When he climbed to the air-raid shelter, he was driven out. Finally, he died in the heavy rain. This dog is a metaphor. This metaphorical montage editing technique shows that the people at that time were like this dog, wandering homeless and having no place to go, and their lives and their fragility could only be slaughtered and fled by themselves in the storm.

In addition, the details setting also plays a great role in the relationship between characters. At the beginning of the film, Mr. Ye and Captain Wang had a meal together, telling the riots of the Japanese army. The two caused a debate on whether to order steamed pork ribs. Later, the camera often showed the two standing in the prison of the secret service and vomiting smoke rings, showing the seemingly harmonious friendship between the characters in the film. On the one hand, this laid the foundation for the two of them to fight each other in the future, and on the other hand, it also contrasts with their fierce performance when they killed people<sup>[7]</sup>.

It can be seen that the use of details and implicit expression not only make the characters more vivid, but also guides the audience's attention and allows them to focus on the physical behavior of the characters in the movie, not just the plot and content of the story.

This kind of detailed metaphor setting and use is not common in genre films and is a common way for literary and artistic films to express their thoughts and emotions. So in this regard, "Hidden Blade" shows a strong style and characteristics of the author's film, and has a very poetic literary style.

#### 4. Conclusion

Director Cheng Er's new work "Hidden Blade" is a spy-war movie with a strong poetic author style. It can be seen that although the plot of the movie is in terms of the plot, the overall plot is the type of spy movie, both violent and obscure pornography. However, its narrative techniques, lens language and details are all full of author style and film literary nature. The film shows the war in the 1930s and 1940s, and reveals a strong poetic temperament from the cruel images, bringing the audience a different aesthetic temperament. The combination of authorship and commerciality sounds incompatible, but with the reconciliation of director Cheng Er, the movie "Hidden Blade" brings the audience a new possibility. It brings new possibilities between genre and artisticity of films.

#### References

- [1] Shen Guofang. *New Concept of Constructing Type Films* [J]. *Contemporary Film*, 2005 (05): 113-116.
- [2] Xia Qingquan. *Hidden Blade ": Gaze, Tension, and Multiple Possibilities of Narrative in Genre Films* [J]. *Contemporary Film*, 2023 (3): 37.
- [3] Xu Pengyuan. *Director Cheng Er of "Hidden Blade": A truly good movie must be more commercial than commercial and more artistic than art.* (January 24, 2023) [January 28, 2023] <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1755889844102106904&wfr=spider&for=pc>.
- [4] Zhou Xuelin, Chen Xuguang. *Dialogue between genre films and art films* [J]. *Journal of Beijing Film Academy*, 2018 (02): 28-35.
- [5] Rao Shuguang. *Chinese genre films: theory and practice* [J]. *Film Art*, 2003 (05): 9-15.
- [6] Liu Juan. *All things are as they are, and they are inherent in each other - A Discussion with Cai Tao on the Photography Creation of "Hidden Blade"* [J]. *Film Art*, 2023 (02): 141-145.
- [7] Xu Pengyuan. *"The Unknown" director Cheng Er: A truly good movie must be more commercial than business and more artistic than art*[J]. *China Newsweek*, 2023(01):17-18.