

"Romance in the Alley": Narrative Strategies of New Mainstream TV Dramas and Films in the Context of "People's Aesthetics"

Yang Ranyi

Eurasia International School of Henan University, Kaifeng, Henan, 475001, China

Abstract: *The television drama "Romance in the Alley" tells a heartwarming realist story set in the late 1970s, against the backdrop of China's reform and opening-up era, where personal growth is inextricably linked to the sweeping changes of the times. This paper will analyze the work from the perspective of "People's Aesthetics", examining its creative logic through approaches such as the commoner's viewpoint, scenario construction, emotional resonance, and themes like "her power" and "warm realism". It will further explore the innovative narrative strategies employed by contemporary mainstream television dramas within the framework of People's Aesthetics.*

Keywords: *People's Aesthetics, Everyday Narratives, Realism*

1. Introduction

1980, the Central Committee of the Communist of China proposed the slogan "Literature and art should serve the people and serve socialism", which charted the course for literary and artistic endeavors in the new era and represented a more dynamic policy for the arts. Since then, the development of entertainment films has advanced by leaps and bounds. However, the excessive entertainment-oriented nature of literary and artistic works has caused significant concern within mainstream society, leading to the emergence of the "main theme" movement. It plays a prominent role in fulfilling propaganda, educational, and political functions, emphasizing the expression of the state's will. Following active intervention at the national level, mainstream films and television dramas achieved breakthrough progress in the 1990s, yet failed to successfully integrate ideology with audience viewing demands. Around 2010, with the development of the market economy and shifts in national policy, the creative style of film and television dramas gradually transitioned from "mainstream themes" to "new mainstream"^[1].

The television drama *Romance in the Alley* tells stories of "individuals and their era" through a "grassroots narrative", focusing on the ordinary lives of residents in a "back alley" during the wave of reform and opening up in the 1970s. Using "ordinary people" as its lens, it explores the truth, goodness, and beauty of human nature, highlighting the kindness and warmth inherent in humanity, society, and the times.

2. The Commoner's Perspective

2.1 People-centeredness

On October 15, 2014, in a speech delivered at the Symposium on Literary and Artistic Work, it was clearly stated that "the most fundamental, crucial, and reliable approach to literary and artistic creation is to take root among the people and in real life". It profoundly explains that literary and artistic endeavors must always adhere to a people-centered orientation in creation.

Since the 21st century, as the film industry and market have matured in their creative development, the ideologies and values portrayed in films and television dramas have also undergone continuous transformation. In the past, mainstream films and television primarily focused on portraying the images of great leaders and national heroes, emphasizing "heroic narratives" and "great man narratives". Today, "new mainstream television dramas" have moved away from grand narratives, instead adopting a "small-scale approach" to depict the everyday lives of ordinary people and grassroots citizens. This shift from "heroic narratives" to "everyday narratives" makes the works more relatable and imbued with a

distinct "people-oriented" character^[2].

Hegel said: "The literary archetype is the unique this one", Engels said: "As Old Hegel put it, it is this". These artistic theories are equally applicable to film and television works. The television drama "Romance in the Alley" employs the artistic technique of contrasting characters to create authentic, multidimensional, and richly developed archetypal figures. This can be attributed to the contrast between one's outward appearance and their true self. For example, Zhuang Chaoying displays a multifaceted, contradictory, and complex personality across different plotlines and settings. He presents himself as amiable and helpful to others, but internally he is extremely timid and blindly devoted to his parents. His life with his wife Huang Ling appeared harmonious and respectable on the surface, but in reality, frequent domestic disputes arose. When his mother-in-law demanded that Zhuang Xiaoting move back to the old house with her and leave the larger home to the boys, he stood by silently, using filial piety as an excuse. Only his wife Huang Ling consistently prioritized their daughter's well-being, staunchly opposing her mother-in-law's attempt to take Zhuang Xiaoting away. In contrast, Zhuang Chaoying appeared particularly weak and ignorant when compared to Huang Ling. He even defended his mother unreasonably, ultimately escalating the family conflict. As soon as Song Ying arrived in the alley, she got into an argument with others. To outsiders, she seemed aggressive and unreasonable. But as the Zhuang and Lin families grew closer through their interactions, they discovered that beneath her blunt and fiery exterior, Song Ying was actually tender, sensitive, kind, and thoughtful. She would lend a helping hand when Huang Ling faced hardship and was moved by her husband Lin Wufeng's love. Song Ying's sharp tongue but soft heart characterization played a crucial role in enriching the role and adding depth to the character's inner world.

This contrast between "external image" and "true self" not only reveals hidden aspects of the self and inner conflicts, but also vividly exposes the "truth, goodness, and beauty" alongside the "falsehood, ugliness, and evil" inherent in human nature. The work employs the "contrast between beauty and ugliness" to render the characters more vivid, concrete, and archetypal.

As Belinsky said, "Every character is a type, and every type is a familiar stranger to the reader".

This work meticulously portrays the contrast between characters' inner emotions and outward appearances, focusing on the narrative of modern conflicts between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, as well as marital tensions. The flashpoint in this family crisis lies in the husband's blind devotion to filial piety. Each act of weakness and compromise only fuels greater conflict. By provoking deep reflection in the audience through the plot, this creative approach highlights the centrality of humanity in the work, making it more people-oriented and contemporary in character.

2.2 Realism

Realism is one of the defining characteristics of contemporary mainstream television dramas and films, typically embodying the objective, typical, and subtle qualities inherent in realism. Renowned film critic Zhong Dianfei emphasized that artistic creation must remain closely connected to real life. He believes realism is the broad path forward for China, and that Chinese film production must rely on real life. Without realism, there would be no Chinese cinema. Beyond this, artistic works must not only authentically recreate real life during the creative process but also construct more archetypal environmental spaces to better depict the social conditions and genuine sentiments of a particular era^[3].

The television drama "Romance in the Alley" portrays the lives of ordinary people living in Suzhou's alleyways against the backdrop of China's reform and opening-up era. Their values, behaviors, career choices, and other aspects are all products of their era, bearing the most distinctive characteristics of the present time. The restoration of the college entrance examination system in the 1970s not only marked the commencement of educational reform but also signaled the intertwining of individual destinies with the era. First, the restoration of the college entrance examination system has led families and society to increasingly recognize the importance and significance of education. Zhuang Chaoying and Huang Ling instilled in their children the belief that the college entrance exam was the paramount priority, subtly influencing their neighbors Lin Wufeng and Song Ying's family. This narrative reflects the shared value choices of that era. Secondly, the drama also portrays the support the state extended to the private sector amid the wave of reform and opening up. From Li Yiming successfully obtaining an individual business license, transitioning from a street vendor to an independent entrepreneur collaborating with multinational corporations, to Lin Dongzhe, Zhuang Tunan, Xiang Pengfei, and Chen Da collectively selling clothing and flipping treasury bonds, the four brothers embarked on their entrepreneurial journey together, earning their first fortune in life. They have all demonstrated through their actions the principle

that "risk and opportunity coexist, and only by daring to take risks can one seize opportunities". Their destinies and experiences offer audiences a glimpse into the values and social characteristics of the 1970s and 1980s, lending the work greater contemporary relevance.

Therefore, new mainstream television dramas and films place greater emphasis on capturing social issues within their historical contexts through narrative design and character development. They reflect contemporary career choices, family ethics, and societal challenges, exhibiting a strong sense of realism.

3. Scenario Construction

3.1 Special Material Selection

The 2021 China Television/Web Drama Industry Report indicates that the development of television/web dramas is increasingly focused on showcasing "people-centered aesthetics" and "humanistic values" with greater attention paid to social issues such as equality, dignity, and happiness. Today, the rise of "she-themed" content (featuring female protagonists) showcases women's evolving roles within family and marriage, vividly illustrating the essence of "she-power" through its imagery, narrative expression, and interpretation of core values. Amidst the current trend of mainstream TV dramas embracing "people's aesthetics", the series "Romance in the Alley" not only portrays the defining characteristics of the reform and opening-up era but also highlights women's "she-power" through the awakening of their consciousness. The drama portrays Song Ying as fiery and outspoken while depicting Huang Ling as gentle yet resilient, amplifying the contrast between their characters to make them more archetypal and representative. When Huang Ling faced her mother-in-law's relentless harassment and her husband's blind devotion to filial piety, when she struggled to breathe beneath life's crushing hardships, when relentless endurance pushed her to the brink of collapse—only Song Ying remained steadfastly by her side. Through her quiet, unwavering care and protection from behind the scenes, Song Ying gave Huang Ling a place to call home in the midst of her turmoil. The drama portrays Huang Ling's transformation from endurance to awakening, along with the mutual admiration between the two women, infusing the plot with warmth and highlighting the beautiful bonds of friendship between women. When Lin Wufeng's job situation changed and he was forced to relocate to Guangzhou for work, Song Ying returned to family life shortly after arriving in the city. She transitioned from being a top-tier female worker at the factory to becoming a homemaker, washing clothes, cooking meals, and tending to the daily needs of her husband and children. The immense changes and psychological dissonance not only left her listless but also made her temper increasingly volatile, gradually causing her to lose sight of herself. So when she decided to break free from her predicament and start her own small business to find her worth, she underwent a remarkable transformation. Her entire being radiated a powerful vitality, starkly contrasting with her former state. The storyline not only showcases the indomitable resilience and tenacity embodied by these women, but also chronicles the emergence of women's self-awareness and the evolution of ideological liberation in China since the reform and opening-up era.

The Romance in the Alley not only breaks free from traditional constraints in its subject matter but also showcases the resilient and beautiful "she-power" embodied by women, thereby advancing the development of "feminine consciousness".

Similarly, in the television drama series "Happy to Ten Thousand Families", the protagonist He Xingfu's independent personality and evolving sense of self-worth enable her to continually awaken her subjective consciousness amid the challenges of urban life and returning home. She not only breaks free from the ideological constraints that solidify women's roles within rural structures but also engages in a profound reevaluation of the emotional alienation and existential anxiety inherent in contemporary urban existence. This narrative holds significant implications for the current rise of "feminist consciousness"^[4].

3.2 Cinematic Language

Cinematographic language stands as the most distinctive expressive technique in the art of film and television. Its core essence lies in transforming subjects into visual symbols through the lens, conveying information by organizing and employing shots. Cinematographic language is primarily composed of six key elements—shot size, camera movement, lighting, color, and others—each conveying distinct visual meanings and emotional implications^[5].

The cinematography in the TV series Romance in the Alley has garnered widespread acclaim. For instance, the scene where Lin Dongzhe and Zhuang Xiaoting dance the waltz in the courtyard has been

praised by audiences as a "masterful transition". In terms of cinematography, the director skillfully blends six key elements to authentically portray the mundane daily life of the 1970s and 1980s for the audience. From a visual perspective, the design elements—such as the sycamore trees lining both sides of the street, the mottled red brick walls, and the vintage furniture—endow the entire street with a rich, authentic sense of everyday life. From a cinematic perspective, the camera movements tracking Lin Dongzhe and Zhuang Xiaoting's dance further evolve, enhancing fluidity and naturalism. The extensive use of push shots, tracking shots, and follow shots facilitates spatial transitions and shifts in viewpoint, adding depth to the visuals and enriching their expressive quality. In addition to its fluid camera transitions, the series employs a blurred approach to time. For instance, the choreography of a song portrays the physical appearance, personality, and growth of Lin Dongzhe and Zhuang Xiaoting: as the boys gradually transition into young adulthood amid the swift passage of time, they present audiences with the innocent friendship and budding, youthful affection of childhood sweethearts from that pure era. The visual design employs abundant warm tones and natural lighting to evoke an atmospheric ambiance, lending the scenes a retro, nostalgic quality reminiscent of the 1970s and 1980s. Complementing this are numerous medium and close-up shots that capture characters' expressions and movements, effectively bridging the gap between the characters and the audience. This approach enhances the immersive quality and authenticity of the visuals.

These elements interplay and permeate each other through flexible cinematography and meticulous editing techniques, vividly conveying the flow of emotions to form a relatively complete visual narrative system. Allowing new mainstream films and TV dramas to return to a commoner's perspective for scenario construction has opened up new avenues for visual creation.

4. Emotional Resonance

4.1 "Warm Reality" as the Core of Creation

Since the concept of warm realism was first proposed by scholars in 2008, it has evolved to encompass not only the typical, realistic, and metaphorical characteristics of realism, but also frequently incorporates warm, positive, and constructive ideals. When confronting life's hardships and adversities, do not evade the pain and trials of reality. Instead, fully and comprehensively present the spiritual essence of the work through warmth, positivity, optimism, and an enterprising and constructive approach. Not only does it retain the various pain points of real life, but it also perfectly captures the expressive power and sharpness of realist works. In contemporary terms, this means immersing oneself in life, taking root among the people, writing for the people, and expressing emotions for the people. Within diverse narrative frameworks and through the shaping of varied character relationships, we create Chinese stories that embody the spirit of the times, reflect social concern, guide emotions, and resonate as heartwarming and credible in the present day^[3].

Romance in the Alley authentically portrays how individual career choices and destinies are inextricably linked to societal development against the backdrop of China's reform and opening-up. For example, the plot depicts the evolution from educated youth sent to the countryside to ordinary workers venturing south to start businesses, and then to the rise of individual, social, and national economies. Focusing the lens on the lives of ordinary people against the backdrop of sweeping societal changes, the narrative adopts a grassroots perspective, using the stories of "small-time characters" to chronicle the transformations of our era. Beyond this, the work also uses conflicts between characters to expose "backward" and "obsolete" ideas that run counter to mainstream social values, thereby highlighting the importance and significance of ideological emancipation. For instance, Zhuang Chaoying's parents believed that so-called "filial piety" meant obeying one's parents and elders without question; that as the eldest son, one must always remember to support one's siblings; and that outdated notions like "a daughter is water poured out once married" perpetuated patriarchal attitudes favoring sons over daughters. These feudal and outdated ideas have deeply permeated the minds of the older generation, unknowingly harming and consuming them bit by bit. However, the emergence of characters like Huang Ling and Song Ying represents the awakening of consciousness within the drama. Not only do we have the right to love life and pursue our dreams, but we also have the courage to say "no" when faced with ethical constraints, educating our children with more equal and progressive ideas. Even while giving of oneself for love, one consistently maintains one's own "agency". The drama skillfully crafts multiple plot conflicts, focusing its lens on the collision between traditional feudal ideology and new ideas. It objectively and authentically presents the generational gap in perspectives within everyday life, while simultaneously contrasting and exposing the harm inflicted by feudal, outdated thinking upon individuals.

The work places greater emphasis on the beauty of "warmth" and "reality", depicting characters supporting and healing one another. By using love to mend the wounds and fractures of reality, it adds a human touch, endowing the work with the distinctive creative characteristics of warm realism^[3].

4.2 Guided by the Values of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty

On October 15, 2014, at a symposium on literary and artistic work, the General Secretary stated: "The pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty is the eternal value of literature and art. The highest realm of art lies in touching people's hearts, purifying their souls, and enabling them to discover the beauty of nature, life, and the human spirit".

Clive Bell, in his book *Art*, defined the essence of art as "meaningful form". Behind this "meaning" lies the artist's most distinctive aesthetic sensibility and pursuit of sublime values. The television drama *Romance in the Alley* presents "truth, goodness, and beauty" in both its portrayal of human nature and its plot development. This not only reflects genuine emotional expression within the framework of "people's aesthetics", but also embodies its inherent unique value and boundless pursuit of aesthetic excellence.

The mutual admiration and beautiful, sincere friendship between the two female characters Huang Ling and Song Ying in the drama deeply moved the audience. Song Ying's fiery spirit and kind heart, alongside Huang Ling's quiet resilience and tolerance, have grown to embrace, support, and guide each other through their long journey together. Under Song Ying's influence, Huang Ling transformed from enduring humiliation and bearing burdens to cherishing and valuing herself. With Huang Ling's companionship, Song Ying evolved from an "exhausted personality" to one with a softer, more sensitive heart and a greater capacity for empathy. Beyond this, the drama also portrays the growth of the alley children from innocence to maturity and steadiness, as well as the supportive, affectionate "alley" where the Zhuang and Lin families across generations help each other and grow together. This television drama resonates more deeply with our lives and aligns more closely with the core essence and tone of contemporary drama productions. From the perspective of "grassroots storytelling", it showcases the authenticity, goodness, and beauty of humanity in new mainstream film and television works under the lens of "people's aesthetics". Not only does it deepen the emotional connection between audiences and characters in films and television dramas, but it also highlights the kindness and warmth concerning humanity, society, and the times. Through ingenious conception and core thematic focus, the work deepens its central expression, achieving a "meaningful form" that embodies the director and creative team's most distinctive aesthetic sensibilities and lofty values.

5. Conclusion

This paper begins with an analysis of the narrative strategies employed in new mainstream television dramas from the perspective of "People's Aesthetics" as depicted in the television series *Romance in the Alley* and proceeds to conduct an in-depth examination. From the perspectives of ordinary citizens, scenario construction, emotional resonance, and the interplay of conflicts and emotional bonds between characters, this work delves deeply into the heartwarming narrative of how social transformation and individual development remain inextricably linked to the era and the nation against the backdrop of continuous societal progress.

By mastering the balance between universal human traits and individuality in its characters, the film gains a more profound sense of humanity, realism, and authenticity. It touches hearts through its ordinary storytelling, breathing new life into the cinematic experience while capturing the essence of everyday life. With a warmer, more positive, and uplifting perspective and approach, it continuously inspires audiences to embrace their true selves, strive with vigor, and forge ahead with determination in life. It comprehensively and fully showcases the spiritual essence and value-guiding role of contemporary literary and artistic works, holding significant spiritual value in today's era.

It is not merely a period ensemble drama, but rather a masterpiece blending realism and romanticism. It not only portrays the inevitable path of creators striving to explore new frontiers, but also highlights the value pursuit of television and film in upholding their principles. Furthermore, it charts a new course for the creation of new mainstream television and film under the lens of a "people's aesthetics" that embraces a warmer realism.

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