

A Study of New Main Theme Films under Rhetorical Theory: Taking the Film "Full River Red" as an Example

Yang Xinbei^{1,a}, Yang Xinlei^{2,b}

¹School of Communication, Shanxi Normal University, Taiyuan, China

²School of Communication, Guangxi Minzu University, Nanning, China

^a13633445068@163.com, ^bYXL1105537982@163.com

Abstract: The film "Full River Red" was released during the Spring Festival of 2023, with Zhang Yimou as the director and Chen Yu as the writer. It achieved significant success, surpassing the \$4 billion mark at the box office. The film deviates from traditional melodramatic film creation and challenges conventional practices in character development, subject matter portrayal, and narrative intentions. "Full River Red" revolves around the conceptual theme of "Full River Red" and employs a narrative polyphony that continuously reverses. It focuses on a minor character who sacrifices his life for justice within a specific historical context. This approach highlights the theoretical nature of "rhetorical film," combining national righteousness as a spiritual core with popular culture and neuro-comedy elements. The skillful combination of commerce and literature in "Full River Red" has resonated strongly with the audience. It follows the artistic character and film aesthetics established by director Zhang Yimou while also providing significant momentum for developing China's new melodramatic cinema.

Keywords: Rhetorical film; Implied author; Agree with rhetoric; Empathic communication; New Mainstream Cinema

1. Introduction

In the Spring Festival of 2023, renowned director Zhang Yimou presented "Full River Red" featuring Shen Teng and Jackson Yee. The film garnered tremendous attention, and its trailer, which focused on comedy and suspense, sparked a heated debate. An integral aspect of the film is its exploration of the stories of minor characters, which strongly resonated with viewers and evoked national emotions. As the implied author, Zhang Yimou conveys his thoughts on history and society, epitomizing the creation of a "rhetorical film." In this context, a "rhetorical film" refers to a cinematic creation that explores legitimate beliefs and delves into these beliefs within a shared context. Melodramatic films are often associated with the concept of rhetorical cinema.

While "Full River Red" can be regarded as a melodramatic film, it defies the inherent traditional model. It successfully achieves a certain balance between commerce and literature, breaking away from the confines of traditional norms. The film's exceptional box office success and high ratings attest to the growing impetus for new melodramatic films. Moreover, this success sets the stage for the post-pandemic era, emphasizing the industry's focus on telling compelling Chinese stories and creating exceptional new melodramatic films.

2. Embodiment of faith in rhetorical films

The film "Full River Red" is a remarkable theatrical piece with a clear and concise storyline. Set during the Southern Song Dynasty, four years after Yue Fei's death, it portrays the treacherous Minister Qin Hui leading the forbidden army to meet with the Golden State for peace talks. However, on the eve of the talks, Jin's envoy is murdered, casting the mission into chaos and causing the secret message to go missing. Qin Hui orders Zhang Da, a junior soldier, and Sun Jun, the deputy commander of the pro-guest battalion, to find the real culprits within one hour.^[1] "Full River Red" encompasses various elements, including image capture, character development, and the language of auditions, making it a sophisticated commercial film worthy of in-depth analysis. As a film centered around national righteousness, it effectively embodies the nation's beliefs, aligning it with the concept of a rhetorical film.

In his book "The Rhetoric of Fiction," Wayne Booth highlights the importance of persuasive rhetoric, personally and for others. A significant rhetorical film should follow this principle. The first dimension of a rhetorical film is to discover beliefs that hold value for oneself and others.

In "Full River Red," the main character, Zhang Da, portrayed by Shen Teng, is driven by the goal of assassinating the traitorous Qin Hui. Amidst numerous reversals, he forms a bond with Sun Jun, played by Jackson Yee, who was initially on the opposing side. Their shared national beliefs, embodied in the mission to "save the nation from peril," lead to Zhang Da sacrificing his relationship with Yao Qin or even his own life. Similarly, Yao Qin, played by Wang Jiayi, a woman who sells her art, jeopardizes her life out of love for her husband and country. The film showcases the profound dedication of these characters, epitomizing the essence of a rhetorical film.

During the film's climax, the character "Double Qin Hui" chants "Full River Red" from the city tower, signifying a decisive moment of national faith. This moment not only packs an emotional punch but also serves as a persuasive element of the rhetorical film. Furthermore, it aligns with the film's second dimension, where rhetoric is seen as an art of persuasion.

Wayne Booth suggests that rhetoric extends beyond persuasion, encompassing the scope of creating or reducing misunderstandings. "Full River Red" incorporates the keywords "comedy" and "suspense," but these comedic elements possess a unique flavor of "black humor" rooted in the fear of death. Actor Shen Teng effectively portrays Zhang Da's comedic aspects, eliciting tears from the audience due to the underlying misunderstandings surrounding his character.

Similarly, the portrayal of Sun Jun at the beginning of the film evokes an impenetrable sense of menace. Through rising and lowering stakes in the narrative, Sun Jun transforms from a character initially disliked by the audience to the embodiment of a young hero. This showcases the creative technique of reducing misunderstandings, a characteristic of the rhetorical film.

Zhang Da and Sun Jun's loyalty and admiration for their country and national heroes exemplify a belief that certain things are more important than life and death. Their faith in righteousness resonates with the audience, intersecting and merging with shared ethnic beliefs. Through the film's expression of a character's journey, the rhetorical film effectively embodies the art of persuasion, conveying the director's intended meaning to the audience.

3. A profound combination of directing and implied authorship

Zhang Yimou, a representative of the fifth generation of directors, has made significant artistic achievements throughout his career. Whether it is a commercial film or an art film, Zhang Yimou consistently exhibits precise control over his creations. He continuously challenges himself while maintaining high artistic standards. His narratives often revolve around the nation's history, making him an implied author of rhetorical films. The concept of the implied author refers to the personality or consciousness that guides the narrator's storytelling, conveying higher-level ideas. Directors, as narrators, embody an implied author in their films. In order to persuade others to believe the narrator's point of view, the quality of the implied author is as important as the story itself, as Wayne Booth suggests.^[2]

Indeed, Zhang Yimou's film "Big Red Lanterns Hanging High" uses symmetrical and closed compositions and the oppressive setting of a cage-like mansion to depict the oppression of women in feudal society. The character of "Xiulian" serves as Zhang Yimou's indictment of the tragic fate suffered by women during that time. Similarly, "Full River Red" and "Big Red Lanterns Hanging High" both creatively focus on a small space while delivering a grand narrative. Zhang Yimou has consistently adhered to his internal constructs in portraying female characters throughout his career. Both "Yaoqin" and "Xiulian" are young and beautiful women who bear the life force within them. Although they may have submitted to men traditionally held power, Zhang Yimou's portrayal empowers these women to possess strong willpower and aspire to freedom, happiness, and positive action even more strongly than their male counterparts.

In a behind-the-scenes interview for "Full River Red," Zhang Yimou revealed that he had initially planned to shoot the film in one continuous take. However, he ultimately abandoned this approach to ensure a refined final product and allow the actors to perform better. Regardless of the filming method, Zhang Yimou draws inspiration from Zhang Da's life to convey his sentiments about national heroes and the historical backdrop. Even the most minor character, as long as their heart is filled with the honor and disgrace of their country, becomes a hero of their time. While "Full River Red" does not directly interpret the character Yue Fei, all the plotlines revolve around him. The spirit of Yue Fei is a shared belief among

Zhang Da, his companions, and even Sun Jun in the film. For viewers outside the film, it serves as an awakening of deep-rooted and powerful patriotic feelings. Consequently, in the realm of "implied authorship," "Full River Red" is considered a success, with Zhang Yimou as its director.

Cinema is often called anthropology because it can evoke a sense of realism and connect viewers to the human experience. The theory of good creativity and the definition of good work can be tied to the ideas expressed in a film. When a film effectively taps into the latent emotions of the audience and treats ordinary people as valuable individuals, it becomes a profound statement that resonates with its time. The ability of a film director is closely linked to the film's overall quality. The ideas and messages that the implied author wishes to convey serve as the core inspiration behind the creation of a film. A great director can bring these ideas to life, mobilize the audience's emotions, and present profound statements about society and the human condition. The quality of a film is influenced by the director's skill and the ideas and messages they want to explore play a fundamental role in the cinematic creation process. When executed masterfully, a film can capture the essence of the human experience and make a lasting impact on its viewers.

4. Effective integration of empathic communication and new mainstream cinema under the "rhetoric of consent" theory

The "rhetoric of assent" theory posits that "human beings not only transmit their mental states through symbolic cues but also construct and shape each other's thoughts."^[2] This concept represents an empathic act of ideological identification. Director Zhang Yimou, known for his skilled use of symbolism in conveying a film's theme, exemplifies this approach. For instance, he incorporates comedic elements, casts many comedic actors, and intertwines comedic trappings within a film that revolves around a heroic theme. Throughout the film, we witness the juxtaposition of suspense and comedy, toughness and tenderness, and comedic tones interwoven with historical themes. Each scene features conflicting and opposing emotional themes continuously transforming within the narrative structure.

Zhang Yimou's distinctive visual style remains evident throughout the film. He employs powerful and striking visual effects characterized by a silver-grey color tone. In the closing scene, the entire army recites the poem "Full River Red" in a macro-style framing, using a large telephoto lens to capture the recitation in a single view. The repetitive montage, depicting the generals reciting the poem repeatedly, embodies the ritual aesthetics and symbolic representations that define the director's unique style. By employing a poem as a symbol of the national backbone, "Full River Red" allows the audience to experience the film's central theme through the story symbolized by the poem.

Psychologist Rogers once suggested that "empathy is the highest human emotion." The essence of filmmaking lies in conveying rich emotions through the construction of images, leading to "empathetic communication." This entails forming, transmitting, and spreading common or similar emotions and feelings. A good film achieves resonance with the audience, allowing for the construction of ideas and mutual understanding, similar to what is expressed in the films embodying the Rhetoric of Consent.

Creating works of art adheres to three fundamental principles: conveying the right concept, fostering positive awareness, and enriching spiritual thought. These principles are interdependent, as one cannot exist without the others. Only when a work of art reaches a high level of completion can the audience move beyond superficial consumption and engage in active interpretation, ultimately resonating with their own real experiences. Generally, empathy emerges and manifests through emotion, cognition, and behavior.^[3] The shift occurs from "seeing" to "understanding." After viewing the film "Full River Red," some audience members unconsciously recited the poem "Full River Red" aloud, while others spontaneously organized to recite it together. These phenomena prove the film's effectiveness in promoting attitudinal and behavioral change through "mutual thought building" and "empathic communication."

As we enter the post-epidemic era, the "Rhetoric of Consent" framework also offers a theoretical foundation for the Chinese film industry to create new mainstream films that resonate with the public. Recent melodramatic films have struggled due to a lack of empathy and resonance with the audience. We find it difficult to relate and empathize with them. It seems as though we have lost the intrinsic ability to narrate history and empathize with those caught in it. Film creators should maintain a sense of social responsibility and deeply reflect the social fabric of society through their films. By consciously utilizing the language of film, they can deconstruct and tell new stories, creating the beauty of new films and exploring the boundaries of cinematic artistry.

"In human society, a person who does not realize the indispensability of shared values cannot exist".^[2]This statement can also be applied to the art of cinema, specifically to every filmmaker. Without understanding the importance of "shared values," it becomes challenging to create good films.

The themes of a film should be rooted in excellent traditional culture or the national beliefs of the people. Filmmakers should strive to "tell a good Chinese story" as their primary goal, avoiding merely exporting dazzling technical techniques or relying solely on star power to achieve commercial success. Indeed, great art films that achieve sublime artistic accomplishments are not driven by technology, violence, or pornography. Films encompass various genres, and good films adhere to this diversity. They start with the essence of the story itself and the essence of art, fully showcasing the originality of the cinematic craft, prioritizing quality, and enhancing the art of film.

The creative ideas behind the film "Full River Red" have pioneered today's study of new mainstream cinema in China. This film places faith, freedom, justice, and love as protagonists. It chooses meaningful subjects and compelling stories, going beyond superficial, flashy special effects. By starting with history itself, the narrative is carefully refined and consistently touches the depths of the viewer's soul.

5. Conclusions

Cinema is an art of synthesis. As French theorist Stiegler pointed out, "In a sense, cinema is a mnemonic device." It carries images of history, serving as an imprint of an individual's life. Moreover, exceptional cinematic art consciously seeks to deconstruct new stories using the language of film. It aims to tell fresh narratives, create new cinematic beauty, and explore the limitless boundaries of cinematic art, enabling us to connect with the vastness of life. When we watch "Full River Red," we see characters like Zhang Da and Sun Jun, along with countless minor characters. We encounter people from history who are just like us, and their lives resonate with ours. In those moments, the emotions that collide within us touch the softest and most profound parts of our hearts. Although thousands of years may separate us from the film's main character, the national beliefs engraved in our bones and blood, rooted in the history and culture of our nation, belong to each of us in the depths of our memories. The emergence of new melodramatic films reflects the positive acknowledgment and recognition of national culture. Audiences appreciate the significance of national beliefs and culture in these films, continuously enhancing national self-confidence and pride. For filmmakers, telling an excellent Chinese story deeply rooted in the social fabric and finding the essence and position of Chinese cinema becomes a journey of perseverance and constant exploration. The goal remains to create films that resonate with the public and capture the essence of Chinese storytelling.

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