

When Sub-culture goes global

--- A Narrative Study on Internal Affairs and the Departed

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ABSTRACT. *Film remake is considered a common practice for Hollywood productions. By analyzing Hong Kong film, *Infernal Affairs* (2002) and its Hollywood film-to-film remake, *The Departed* (2006), it is easy to notice that film remake is not only about telling the same story. The differences in storytelling and filmmaking indicate different ideologies that appeal to expectation and aesthetics of their spectators, and their target markets respectively.*

KEYWORDS: *narrative theories, film remake, ideology, sub-culture, Hollywood hegemony*

1. Introduction

Theories of narrative probably date back to Aristotle's declaration, in *Poetics*, that every story has to have a beginning, a middle and an end. Since then, there has been a significant body of research concerning narrative and its importance to comprehension and sense making. Even as the communication media have changed through social and technological developments, the narrative form persists. "A narrative is a chain of events in cause-effect relationship occurring in time and space" [1] claimed David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson in *Film Art: An Introduction*, and "narrative relies on causality, time, and space". David Bordwell further mentions in his book *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* that most screenwriters acknowledge the three-act structure: introduction - extended struggle - solving the problem, and around the world it is taught as the optimal design for a mass-market movie. [2] Bordwell's division of narrative structure strictly conforms to his argument of cause-effect relationship. According to them, the agents of cause and effect can be characters, with their character traits that function causally in narrative. They can also be supernatural factors that bring about events in the film. Spectators actively seek to connect events by means of cause and effect by hypothesizing what might have caused them, or what they might in turn cause, based on particular time and locale the events take place. That is,

spectators look for causal motivation in specific spatiotemporal contexts, so as to have their expectation fulfilled or cheated. Serving the role of facilitating human comprehension, narrative serves as a way of organizing and making sense of experience, idea, or viewpoints. Film, as one of the major forms of media in the world, typically conveys information through the combination of visual, textual and audio means. Thus, film narrative becomes a much closer and immediate approximation of how people experience the real world than other forms of narratives. As such, it is important that narrative and narrative patterns should be taken into account when thinking about film interpretation.

In a way similar to Aristotle or Bordwell's three-act models, Tzvetan Todorov, a Bulgarian philosopher, argues that narrative in its most basic form consists of three stages: "an initial situation (situation 1); a problem which disrupts this situation; a resolution of the problem which allows the reinstatement of the initial situation, perhaps with slight changes (situation 2)" [3]. Then he further elaborates his three stages into "a causal 'transformation' of a situation through five stages":

- 1) a state of equilibrium at the outset;
- 2) a disruption of the equilibrium by some action;
- 3) a recognition that there has been a disruption;
- 4) an attempt to repair the disruption;
- 5) a reinstatement of the initial equilibrium.

Each stage of a narrative, according to Todorov, is not an "individual element", as the stages are connected to each other in "relationship" [3] --- the cause-effect relationship. Todorov's model differs from that of Aristotle and Bordwell in the sense that in both Aristotle and Bordwell's divisions, narrative is seen as a linear structure, while in Todorov's, narrative is seen as a circular one, with narrative driven by the need to restore the state of equilibrium. Nonetheless, the equilibrium attained at the end is the outcome of a process of transformation, and it is not necessarily identical with the one at the beginning.

2. Narrative analysis

2.1 Similarities and differences in Narrative workings

According to Todorov's narrative model, it is easy to notice that examining Hong Kong film, *Infernal Affairs* (2002) and its Hollywood remake, *The Departed* (2006) provides us with a clearer understanding of how different factors take effect in making films in Hong Kong and Hollywood, resembling each other on one hand, and diverse in ideology on the other. To take the story, which these two films based on as a whole, it generally matches Todorov's five stages of a "causal 'transformation' of a situation". The initial equilibrium between the police and the gang is significant only after we know there will be a disruption of the infiltrating acts of moles from both sides. Such a disruption is recognized during a failed deal

of the gang side and the equally failed operation in catching the gangsters in the act of the police side, where people from both sides discover there is a mole in their side. Therefore, here comes the stage of attempting to repair the damage, where both sides start to take action, trying to find out and uproot the mole. Finally, when the films end, in the Hollywood version, a tentative new equilibrium is attained by putting both moles to death, and we are aware that “the disruption only occurs in order to be ‘put right’ at the end” [3]. Whereas, in the Hong Kong version of the story, it seems to be a subtly different case for the gangster mole is left alive.

Comparatively speaking, in accordance with Todorov’s division of narrative structure, *The Departed* is more standard while *Infernal Affairs* plays with Todorov’s structure. In *Infernal Affairs*, it seems to begin with fast pace that goes straight for the problem, with only less-than-ten-minutes montage crosscuts to introduce the plans of infiltration operations. It leaves the audience to doubt whether the initial state of equilibrium is deliberately omitted, or it just never exists in the nonstop confrontation between the two sides. Similarly, *Infernal Affairs* ends not in a closure of the story, but in what we call an open narrative. Usually seen in soap operas, an open narrative ends on a cliffhanger to lure the audience back for a next one, and it is typically difficult to tell when it reaches its conclusion. The survival of Ming at the end of the film is unsettling for audiences. His maintenance of the seemingly secure identity as a mole in the police can be taken as a brand-new state of equilibrium. Meanwhile, because it not only creates a strong sense of irony, but also keeps the spectators in suspense, it brings the convenience to start another narrative, namely the prequel of *Infernal Affairs*. However, in *The Departed*, there is a prologue extending the plot up to around twenty minutes before the name of the film is shown onto the screen, which serves as a close of the equilibrium stage and the beginning of the disruption stage. Correspondingly, the death of Colin as the closure conforms to the close narrative, in which, a majority of story threads are tied up within the screen duration, and the event that drives the story has come to a conclusion. David Bordwell mentions about the endings in his review of the two films, “*The Departed* swerves from the original in a way that softens its impact.” [4] In *Infernal Affairs*, the triad mole, Ming is left alive and seemingly victorious, which creates a powerful bleak effect for the villain is seldom left standing in local convention; while both Billy and Colin are dead in *The Departed*, which instead, goes more faithfully with the Hong Kong mainstream --- the crime get paid. Closed narrative reassures the audience about the fulfillment of their anticipation, and increases their enjoyment in watching the film. Probably aiming at putting more weight into the film, Scorsese’s manipulation of freezing the camera at a rat wandering along the balcony with the backdrop of the gilded State House dome at the very end, leaves audience room for speculation, upon the identities of themselves, or the corrupted authority, for rat signifying mole literally. In a word, consisting of a logical relation between one event and another, a sense of closure at the end, and a story focusing on characters, the narrative of *The Departed* accords with what Timothy Corrigan refers to as “a classic narrative” [5].

2.2 Differences in ideology due to various narratives

In the comparison between the Hong Kong film *Infernal Affairs* and its remake, the Hollywood film *The Departed*, both are well-received in their target markets respectively, and hailed as masterly made, they are different in their narrative workings, and in the ideology conveyed. Again, Martin Scorsese's *The Departed* goes with the typical ideology of film narrative exploited in Hollywood gangster films, resting on the three-stage development of narrative as discussed in the previous section, which entails an ideology suggesting that social order can be restored. "The narrative pattern and ideology", Dominic Strinati remarks, "indicate that the prevailing structure of power can be protected, even if it may have to accommodate aspects of the disruption for order to be effectively restored." [6] The death of the villains in the end of the film provides a clear-cut tying up of all the loose ends, and a conclusion that typical narrative demands, leaving the audience a positive hope of their life and the society they live in. Moreover, applying to the ideology associated with the narrative structure, *The Departed* conforms to the convention that "the problem the social order has to deal with is posed by the gangster and his criminal activities". [6] The villains, namely the gangsters, should be blamed to be the cause of the disruption of the initial equilibrium, by their excessive "criminal operations that flout the law", and by their "callous violence that harms the non-criminal world" [6]. Consequently, the police force has to intervene and to destroy the disruption caused, and only by doing away with them can we restore the social equilibrium --- gangsters, with Costello and Colin being the representatives, are doomed to death.

"By focusing on the collision of Yan and Ming", as Law Wing-Sang states in *The Violence of Time and Memory Undercover: Hong Kong's Infernal Affairs*, the film has set itself apart from the "paranoiac criticism of secrete state-ordered operation" [7] in most of the previous masterpieces that use the same spy motif. That is because, for Yan, in order to stop being adrift on his confusing life and to regain his authenticity, he must recover all the related records and memories. While for Ming, who desires to place himself on a decent track, he must clear all the records and memories of his past, and eliminate all the witnesses who could possibly reveal his disreputable identity. Further elaborated by Law is the profound question, which compels onto viewers: what will one do if one is tired of one's present life and is set to give one's self a rebirth? [7] Beyond doubt, unlike *The Departed* that concerns on individual against society, *Infernal Affairs* leans more to individual within the social realm in the tone of eastern philosophy and religion as suggested by the Chinese title of the film *Wujiandao/ Mo Ghaan Dou*, which literally refers to the Buddhist belief that long life is the cruelest punishment in hell. It shadows the characters' lives, especially Ming's because he is the one who physically survives, being trapped in a continuous hell of the "can't-be-oneself" pain and torture in the soul, leaving the audience both a sense of closure and an unending limbo. Meanwhile, it has a more drastic impact on the audience than that of *The Departed*, for the reason that the good guy dies, but the villain survives, and more sarcastically, the villain is rewarded with honor. Does it imply the hopelessness of restoring the social order, or to link it with the similar lack in depiction of an initial equilibrium, does it mean

the failure in ever achieving a real equilibrium in society?

When mentioning Hong Kong cinema, Poshek Fu and David Desser suggest that, “Hong Kong presents a theoretical conundrum... a cinema without a nation, a local cinema with transnational appeal” [8]. And as Stephen Teo writes on a paper delivered at the Second International Conference on Chinese Cinema in Hong Kong Baptist University:

“The world today is divided into Hollywood (focal plane number one) and a series of national cinemas (focal plane number two). There is the theme of globalization associated with the dominant cinema that is Hollywood, or the dominant world culture (namely, American culture). ...Hollywood is equated with the notion of global culture, but we would do well to remember that Hong Kong cinema has its own transnational paradigm — one that is near global enough if it isn't entirely global. The market for Hong Kong pictures today includes China, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, the traditional Southeast Asian market, and many other parts of the world (such as Africa, the Middle East) that we tend to overlook. The diversity of these markets somehow confirm the resourcefulness of the Hong Kong film industry and it's true that Hong Kong filmmakers often make films to suit the tastes and demands of each market.” [9]

For a long time, Hong Kong cinema, as a local cinema that possesses huge influence in south-east Asia and Chinese-speaking population all over the world, has been aggressive in finding a balance between the standardization of itself in accordance with Hollywood, and the insistence of Chinese or eastern convention. In fact, *Infernal Affairs*, borrowing a lot of shooting and editing techniques from Hollywood, and even the single-serving-or-trilogy mentality that requires film series to continue far past their life expectancy, witnesses a climax of such kind of ambivalence, by consisting of Chinese philosophical and aesthetic conventions and Hollywood production strategies, and as a result, it receives overwhelming commercial success. As David Bordwell concludes on the Hong Kong way of storytelling, of combination of images and music, and of arousing and shaping widely shared human feelings, “These transcultural appeals are matters of artistry, the artistry of entertainment.” [10]

3. Conclusion

When comparing *Infernal Affairs* and *The Departed*, we see on one hand, the sub-cultural side aiming to “go global” by adopting international paradigms dominated by Hollywood, and the globalized Hollywood reinforcing its dominance on the other hand. Lee Artz remarks in *Globalization, Media Hegemony, and Social Class* that, “...hegemony does not ‘move beyond’ political economy or cultural studies, but incorporates and enhances their perspectives to better understand the globalization of the free market and the parallel globalization of commercial media models.” [11] As economy and culture no longer constitute separate domains of human activities, it is simplistic to merely judging the implementation of Hollywood's globalization as a leading export industry of America or an agent to

propagate American cultural values. As cultural theorist Franco Moretti discovers, among the years between 1986 and 1995, “In 24 countries, American films make up between 75 and 90 percent of the decade’s top hits; in another 13 the percentage climbs above 90; in 5 cases it reaches 100.” [12] According to the 2018 yearly box office report online, top ten films worldwide are mostly Hollywood productions. Economically, taking up a large majority of American films, the massive Hollywood productions have a huge audience to be profitable, and thus, they can spend much larger sum on films, stars, and film publicity. That is to say, their enormous budgets mean that they are able to and must capture the largest possible audience. Furthermore, by adapting an already-proven successful film as *Infernal Affairs*, and adjusting it to be a more acceptable version towards the global market, the Hollywood cineastes minimize the risk they have to take, and at the same time, further increase the return. “For Hollywood,” as Sharon Waxman criticized, “remakes are a way of investing in a concept that has already proved itself with an audience, in a business where millions are at stake with each movie deal. And why release a foreign original ... when they can make much more money remaking it with American stars and to American tastes?” [13] Waxman’s critique leads the conclusion to the cultural perspective: culturally, American religious, national, political, moral and even economic values are conducted in different ways in Hollywood movies. As the globally prevalence of American films, what goes global along with it is the globalizing American culture and American cultural icons. The appeals and attraction of American films and the American values and culture they embody and convey, is part of what Joseph Nye, dean of Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government, calls the United States’ “soft power”. [14] In *The Departed*, what is appreciated is not only the toughness of the male Hollywood actors, but also the biases of Chinese government mobsters being portrayed satirically, the racial slur like “nigger” or “ginni”, as well as jokes about paedophilia, degradation of women and outbursts of excessive violence. Besides, unlike what is emphasized in the *Infernal Affairs* --- fate, loyalty, and faith, which is typically religious and oriental, Scorsese explores the development of his protagonists in a more practical and rational way, from their upbringing to their struggles against their identities, and furthermore to their desire of climbing up the social ladder. He simply tactfully goes with the typical Hollywood narrative, which “often contains an ideology of aspiration and conformity consistent with the American dream and the conservation of social order”. [6] *The Departed* as a remake film, “[o]perating on the principle that consumers buy what looks familiar, Hollywood affixes its stylistic signature in the remaking of a foreign film in order to ensure the success of its international and domestic reception.” And by “‘correct’[ing] the foreign film’s sub-Hollywood craftsmanship and its deviations from the familiar and highly marketable Hollywood narrative” [13], Martin Scorsese compels to audience all over the world via Hollywood’s globalized perspective and its reign of the spectacle.

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