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The Mistake by the River: Chaotic Unreliable Narrative Subverts Solidified Mindset

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Abstract: *The Mistake by the River* has drawn significant attention since its 2023 premiere. Adapted from Yu Hua's novel, directed by Wei Shujun and starring Zhu Yilong, the film uses 16mm film to reproduce the 90s visual style. It tells a story of a murder case in a southern town where the protagonist, Ma Zhe, faces confusion between reality and falsehood. The film's adaptation process is analyzed based on Linda Hutcheon's theory, showing how it balances fidelity and innovation. It also exhibits characteristics of an art film, with an unreliable narrative and dream plots that reflect the protagonist's inner thoughts. The conclusion of the case reveals the film's deeper meaning about the coexistence of reason and absurdity in the world, challenging the audience's expectations of traditional detective films and providing a new perspective for exploration.

Keywords: *The Mistake by the River*, Adaptation, Unreliable Narrative, Art Film, Human Nature.

1. Introduction

Since its premiere in 2023. *The Mistake by the River* has attracted the attention of many fans and critics. Adapted from Yu Hua's novel, *The Mistake by the River* is directed by Wei Shujun and acted by Zhu Yilong. The film makes bold attempts in visual presentation and narrative structure, leading the audience to think deeply about the complexity of human nature, fate and truth [1].

The story takes place along the river, in a small southern town, where a mysterious murder case unravels in his pursuit of the case, the head of the criminal police, Ma Zhe, discovers that all the evidence points to a person who is believed to be mentally deranged. As the investigation progresses, Ma Zhe begins to question whether his perceptions are real, and gradually falls into the confusion of intertwining reality and falsehood [2].

Screenwriter Kang Chunlei said, 'The case itself is actually a metaphor for the process of our discovery of the world.'This statement reveals the deeper theme of the film, which is revealing the nature of human nature and society through the case.

Wang Shimiao, commented, '*The Mistake by the River* captivates the audience with its unique perspective and profound thematic connotations, providing them with the opportunity to reflect on life and destiny [3]. This is not only a breakthrough in Zhu Yilong's performance, but also an important attempt for Chinese film to explore profound humanistic themes.'

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Yu Hua, the author of the original, highly approved of the film [4]. '*The Mistake by the River* is very faithful to the original, while making a new attempt at cinematic language, which is a perfect reproduction of the original.'

Peer reviews are also very positive. Director Jia Zhangke praised, '*The Mistake by the River* expresses complex emotions and thoughts in an extremely pure way, which is a great challenge for the director's skills and the actors' ability to express themselves.'[5]

2. Literature Review: Adaptation Studies

The Mistake by the River, a film adapted from a literary work, occupies an important position within the field of literary adaptation studies. This paper will delve into the adaptation process behind it in relation to Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation*.

Hutcheon's theory of adaptation focuses on the concept of double definition – which are: adaptation is both a product and a process. She further proposes three contractual models: the telling model, the showing model and the interactive model, which provide a powerful analytical framework for understanding the adaptation process of *The Mistake by the River*.

By applying these theories, we are able to gain a deeper insight into how the film balances fidelity to the original with innovative performance in its transformation from text to screen.

2.1. Two Theoretical Background of Adaptation

2.1.1. Theoretical Bases of Postmodernism

Hutcheon's theoretical study of adaptation is based on the theory of postmodernism, which she characterises as pluralistic, provisional and contradictory. This theory provides an open and inclusive perspective for the study of adaptation, so that adaptation is no longer regarded as a simple copy or imitation of the original work, but as a new process of creation and interpretation.

2.1.2. Impact of the Replicative Genes Theory

In her theory of adaptation, Hutcheon invokes the replicating gene theory in biology, which suggests that adaptations adapt to new media and cultural environments through imitation and evolution. This theory explains why adaptations can survive and thrive in different cultures. For example, *The Mistake by the River* may have retained the core plot and themes of the original in the adaptation process, but made appropriate adjustments to suit the new audience in a different cultural zeitgeist (1988-2023).

2.2. Adaptation as A Product: Balancing Fidelity and Innovation

The Mistake by the River retains the plot and characterisation of the original in its adaptation, while innovating in its narrative structure and presentation. Hutcheon points out that adaptations need to remove and expand on the original work to suit the new medium and audience needs. The film removes some detailed descriptions from the novel, while adding some visual elements and sound effects to enhance the story. This balance of fidelity and innovation allows *The Mistake by the River* to appeal to both fans of the original and new audiences [6].

2.3. Adaptation as Process: the Process of Creation and Reception

Adaptation is not only a creative process, but also a process of cognitive acceptance. During the creative process of *The Mistake by the River*, the director and screenwriter reinterpreted it into a film work through their understanding of the original. In the process of acceptance, the audience is able to

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realized the theme of the original through their cognition and interpretation of the film. According to Hutcheon, the participation of cognitive subjects in the adapted work is very important, as they create their own textual interpretation according to their own understanding. In the novel, Yu Hua shows Ma Zhe's inner world and complex emotional fluctuations through delicate textual descriptions. However, in the film adaptation, these inner descriptions cannot be fully presented due to the limitations of the visual medium. Therefore, the director and screenwriter conveyed Ma Zhe's emotional state through the actors' performances, camera language and sound effects. Audiences who are familiar with the original novel will naturally associate with the descriptions in the novel when watching the film, thus gaining a richer experience of the story. This process of cognitive acceptance enables the audience better to understand the movie's plot and character settings while enhancing their memory and identification with the original novel [7].

2.4. Application of the Theory of Intertextuality

The theory of intertextuality stresses the mutual references between texts and the relationship of dialogue across texts. In the adaptation of *The Mistake by the River*, an intertextual relationship is formed between the former text and the adapted work, and the audience can associate the content and style of the original novel while watching the film.

Adapted from Yu Hua's novel, the film adaptation of *The Mistake by the River* demonstrates the intertextual relationship through specific episodes.

In the film, Detective Sergeant Ma Zhe begins to track down the suspect from a tape in a woman's handbag dropped at the place of crime and the testimony of an eyewitness, a child.

This plot not only preserves the core plot of the original film but also enhances the audience's immersion through visual elements. The tape and the child's testimony in the film are important clues driving the plot forward.

The narrative of the film, the process of eliminating and locking down suspects is cleverly constructed as a tense mind game. Ma Zhe checks out the possible suspects one by one, and finally locks his eyes on the mad man adopted by the granny. This process is reinforced by tight editing techniques and suspenseful musical ambience, allowing the audience to guess the real culprit in a tense atmosphere, while the addition of visual elements such as sound effects and camera language make the process even more gripping [8].

These specific episodes not only demonstrate the intertextuality of the relationship between the film and the original, but also enrich the audience's experience through the inclusion of visual and auditory elements. This intertextuality not only enhances the artistic value of the adaptation, but also enriches the audience's experience [9].

3. Analysis on The Mistakes by the River

The Mistakes by the River is an art film that subverts conventional impressions, using the detective genre as a vehicle to pose a profoundly thought-provoking question to the audience: 'Does everything have to have a clear-cut conclusion?' Despite the veneer of a detective film, the essence of the film remains an art film rather than a genre film, which creates a great sense of tearing between the point the film is trying to convey and the story structure it relies on, and this strong feeling then embodies the deconstructive and rebellious nature of art films.

3.1. A Deductive Film without Deductive Reasoning

As an art film based on criminal investigation and online in cinemas, *The Mistake by the River* won't satisfy some fans who entered the cinema who expecting to watch a detective case, leaving aside the background of the story, it is not similar with traditional detective film.

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It is too confusing. From the beginning to the end, the audience's thoughts are confused, and they have no way to think about those deductive questions: Where did the woman with curly hair go? What does the dead granny have in common with Wang Hong and the child? Why are the crimes committed by the river? Did the madman die under Ma Zhe's gun or not?

Unlike these great detectives, he did not like these great detectives, after some showy reasoning, to break down the suspect's psychological defences, solving the case in one fell swoop. Also, he almost took his own life as a suspect of the hairdresser's provocation in front of him to commit suicide, the pregnant wife quarreled with him, the imminent birth of his son has a risk of disability, and the slow progress of the case has also impacted his chances of receiving awards within the unit.

But the film does not end like this, the madman appeares in front of Ma Zhe with the murder weapon on the night Wang Hong died by the river and was arrested, the audience is as sceptical about the result as Ma Zhe, the suspect surrendered himself, how can this case be so simple, and then to the back of the all the clues point to the barber, the barber took the poison, the audience only think the case is finally going in the right direction, just like Ma Zhe.

But unexpectedly, this is the beginning of the film's twist, from here, the direction of the film becomes confused, the barber not only proved his innocence but also took his own life right in front of Ma Zhe, the case's truth evaded Ma Zhe yet another time, and his wife's pregnancy test also shows that the child in the belly may have a congenital disability, and his wife also for the child to keep or not to have a dispute, Considering these two Ma Zhe's mental state deteriorated rapidly, and this was also reflected in the content presented in the film. The audience no longer saw as complete evidence and investigative direction as before the barber's suicide.

This is also expressed in the film; the audience is no longer like the barber before the suicide and can see the complete evidence and investigation direction. The film discusses the details of this case less, but to give a lot of space to the dream plot, the audience cannot be involved in solving the case of this stifling psychology, but let them succeed, really into the role of Mazhe.

3.2. Unreliable Dreams Reflect the Real Thoughts

As a police officer, Mazhe believes in logic and has his agenda for everything, so anything illogical and beyond his expectations will confuse him. One scene that really demonstrates this is at the end of the film, when Maze returns home to have dinner with his wife. This is one of the few warm scenes in the second half of the film, and it is so warm that it gives people a feeling of unreality. If we look into the details of this scene, it is not difficult to see that this scene is not real, but is only in Mazhe's imagination, or his dream.

Because in this dinner scene, the wife uses her left hand to hold chopsticks, but before the results of the pregnancy test come out, the wife, whether when she is playing jigsaw puzzles or touching the child in her belly both with her right hand the right hand indicates the real life, but in Ma Zhe's dream, the wife became left-handed, the same as the beginning of the film kills Granny Shiyi's subjective view of the footage shown in the scene, and that is, from the beginning of the film the wife with straight hair (Figure 1 (a)) becomes a wavy curly hair in this scene (Figure 1(b)), which also matches the characteristics of the suspect identified by Wang Hong. In this dream, Ma Zhe's wife embodies all the elements of his imagination regarding an enemy.

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(a) (b)

Figure 1: *The Mistake by the River* Stills

The suspect with curly hair and left-handed, who has not yet been caught, is Ma Zhe's enemy in his capacity as a police officer. His wife, who gave birth to a child with potential disabilities and wants to keep the child, thus arguing with Ma Zhe, is Ma Zhe's enemy on a family level, as a husband. Both of these throw Mazzei's logical thinking into chaos, The mutation of a fetus is like a 'random' murderer, irrational and unreasonable. Once it happens, it has happened, and any rational analysis of it is futile.

3.3. Unreliable Narratives

The film did not need to go for such an unreliable narrative to confuse the audience. Unreliable narration is a characteristic that distinguishes much modern literature from traditional literature. In the context of detective fiction, this can be likened to the works of Agatha Christie and Arthur Conan Doyle, similar to Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans* and Raymond Chandler's *The Long Goodbye*. In classical detective novels, the detective acts as an omniscient deity, following a set procedure to gather evidence and then naturally presenting the truth to the reader. The image of the detective in modern literature is more and more like a ordinary person, who may, after putting in a lot of efforts find that his judgement is all wrong, the so-called ‘truth’ is only his own opinion. Keigo Higashino, Japan's best-selling speculative fiction writer, can be said to be the epitome of the evolution of the detective literature. His reputation is basically brought by the speculative fiction novels he has created, such as *The Devotion of Suspect X*. However, a work in the later stage of his creation is not as famous. Still, it reflects his thinking on speculative literature better than any of his previous works - *The Code of the Famous Detectives.*

In this work, Keigo Higashino presents the story from the perspective of a "foolish police officer" who is close to a detective. In this work, the famous detective becomes a star who is praised by all the characters. The foolish police officer even deliberately skips over the details of the investigation to give credit to the famous detective. In the final chapter, Higashino writes the story from the first-person perspective of the famous detective, revealing that the detective himself is the murderer. This bold creation seems to be a "desecration" of detective fiction, but it is a deconstruction of it. Where is the so-called "honkaku mystery" detective fiction? The classical detective novels are merely a display of the author's logical consistency. The reader, including the author himself, has not actually engaged in any deduction. The information received by the reader is all deliberately provided by the author. The reader has always been in a passive receiving state, from passively receiving "clues" to passively accepting the judge's decision made by the famous detective.

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4. Conclusion

Regarding the conclusion of the case, when combined with the original work, the murderer should be the fool. He killed three people: Granny Shiyi, Wang Hong, and a child. He killed Granny Shiyi because she had a masochistic tendency, and physical abuse brought her pleasure. However, the fool did not control his strength well and accidentally killed her. Wang Hong was killed because he lay by the river where Granny Shiyi died, with an overly literary written breakup letter beside him. The fool misunderstood the letter, thinking that Wang Hong wanted to die like Granny Shiyi. The child had previously thrown stones at the fool. The fool did not retaliate before Granny Shiyi's death, but when he encountered the child later, he thought the child was trying to make him happy by throwing stones. So he threw stones back, but with an adult's body and a fool's mind, he did not control his strength and accidentally killed the child.

This deep insight into reality also reveals the unique charm of art film in the detective film genre. Unlike traditional detective stories that pursue rigorous logic and clear cases, art films are more inclined to explore the multi-faceted nature of human nature and the unpredictability of life. In *The Mistake by the River*, we don't see a clear and straightforward solution; any conclusion might be true, as the tagline on the film's poster says: "No answer, might as well go crazy." This open-ended narrative structure challenges the audience's inherent expectations of a traditional detective film, stimulating the desire for deeper interpretation and reflection and experiencing a richer and more profound journey of artistic exploration.

Through this unique narrative, the film adaptation of the novel is not just a simple reproduction of the original story content but also a discovery and interpretation of the deeper meaning behind the story. It gives the audience a new perspective and encourages them to feel and understand the work differently. In the process of adaptation, art films are like a delicious dish made with care, presenting audiences with a series of carefully selected spiritual feasts; each dish is a profound reflection on life, humanity, and existence, allowing people to enjoy the visual and emotional experience while at the same time touching the depths of their hearts and reflecting on their worldview.

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